TOP MANAGEMENT

BOOK 01

Long Umbrella

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Top Management
(탑 매니지먼트)

by

Long Umbrella
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Synopsis

Jung Sunwoo was an average man.

He had just taken his first job at W&U, a celebrity management company, as a manager.

He could finally achieve his dream of being the manager of a world-famous actor or actress.

On his way to work, he fell into what appeared to be a lucid dream about his future.

As he went on with his day, he realized it may not have simply been a lucid dream.

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Prologue

When I was young, I was the kind of kid that would have to rip out the answer keys at the back of every workbook I bought. If I didn't, then when I was even slightly stuck on a problem, I would turn to the back of the workbook to steal a look at the answer. The solution and the solving process. I could never refuse that sweet temptation.

I was amazed at the kids who could resist that temptation.

How did they resist?

Anyways, that was when I was young. I was now at that age where I have no use for workbooks and I couldn't steal a look at the answer keys to the problems I will face.

However...

One day, I suddenly started to see the answer keys of my life.

Chapter 1: Management Business Department Team 3, New Manager (1)

Uhuh… Am I dreaming right now?

It was the only conclusion I could make as I was sitting in an office I had never seen before.

It was an incredibly spacious, fine office.

It was a great sight, but since it felt like I didn’t belong here, I was very nervous. Almost like going into a high-class hotel restaurant with a dress code while wearing stretched out pajamas or a t-shirt that could only be used as a rag and bathroom slippers.

It was that kind of feeling.

Must be a dream, right?

Since there was some sort of hologram-like thing on top of the table, it definitely must be a dream.

How weird. I didn’t watch a lot of science fiction movies these days, why was I having a dream like this?

Huh. I could see the clouds outside the window.

The office was the size of a playground with a window that spanned an entire wall, but there were even clouds floating around outside. It looked like the view you would see from an airplane... Were those really clouds? Or a video? If they were real, how high was this office?

Nah, if it was a view of the world with ‘overtechnology‘, the office might even be flying.

Even though I was quite eager to confirm it, I couldn’t.

There was a reason why I thought this was a dream.

Currently, as if I was a puppet, my body was moving without my control. My head turned by itself, gazed at the clouds outside once and then looked down at my watch.

“Hmmm... It’s almost 2 p.m.”

Even my mouth moved involuntarily and spoke.

Although I couldn’t control it, the senses definitely worked. Sight, hearing, smell, touch and although I was not completely sure, from the unpleasant taste of my saliva when I gulped, I think I could taste as well.

It was a bit frightening. I guess this was what they call a lucid dream.

“It certainly is. If Chairman Jung is ready, shall we start the interview?”

A pleasant tone. My head turned. I looked at the woman who sat in front of me.

She seemed to be in her mid-forties. Just from her voice, I imagined a gentle face, but it was the opposite. Short blond hair. The sharp edges of her eyeliner above her wrinkles showed her confidence and her distinct ink black lips drew the most attention.

Hmm? Black lips?

Her choice of lipstick was quite unique.

However, have I seen this woman before? I heard that the figures who appear in the dream have similar appearances of people you know in real life.

“With pleasure.”

My lips moved again.

“But, why did Director Park come all the way here?”

“Of course, I need to come for Chairman Jung’s exclusive interview. Then Chairman might even spare a bit more time. Is

that not right? I could expect that much considering our relationship."

"Haha, certainly. Are you going to conduct the interview?"

"The interview will be conducted by Reporter Song, I will step in from time to time. I know as much as there is to know about Chairman Jung, I thought it would be better to get a young person to think outside the box and get some new information."

I then realized that there was a young woman sitting next to Director Park. She was a mixed-race beauty as her small face had various ethnic traits. Even her body was gorgeous. However, under Director Park's strong presence, she didn't draw much attention.

"Introduce yourself, Reporter Song."

"Yes! Hello, Chairman Jung. My name is Song Song."

It was a relief I couldn't control my body. If not, I may have laughed involuntarily.

"Nice to meet you, Reporter Song."

My body held a conversation with the mixed race beauty. As there was nothing I could do, I couldn't help, but listen in on their conversation. I carefully looked at whatever was in my sight. As it was my first lucid dream, everything was amazing.

The eyes that were looking at the reporter moved. They briefly passed by something that resembled a computer screen. Even the face that appeared for a second on its shiny black surface. Although it was brief, I saw it.

It was my face only it looked around twenty years older.

So that was why I was able to comfortably talk with Director Park.

My body moved. This time, my eyes look down as I fixed my outfit. A suit that looked like what a British gentleman spy would wear. A necktie. A leather watch that clasped perfectly on my wrist. Even the me who does not know much about brands felt that it was very expensive.

It seemed like I make quite a bit of money?

For a reporter in a directorial position to call me “Chairman Jung, Chairman Jung” to curry favor, seemed like I am quite successful in society.

Some say a dream was the manifestation of your subconscious... It was lucky that it was my dream, if anyone else knew, they would kick their blankets.

“Now then...”

The reporter who looked extremely nervous started the interview.

“If we want to talk about Chairman Jung Sunwoo, we can’t exclude your success story. You started from the bottom, stubbornly struggled your way to the top and now you are the chairman of a global management company. You started out in W&U, do you remember your first day at work?”

“Of course. Even though it has been a long time. I still clearly remember that day. I was struggling to sleep that night when suddenly I got a call to come in to work by 4 a.m. I was unable to sleep a wink and had my brother give me a ride to work.”

“How was your first day as a member of society?”

“Ah, that day was truly dynamic.”

“In what way?”

“When I applied to work in the Management Business Department, I was sure I was going to work with actors. I loved movies and dramas and my dream was to raise an international actor with my two hands. I even appealed that point strongly in the interviews...”

Then?

“When I finally arrived, I was assigned to a girl idol group who

debuted two years ago.”

What?

Did I get really stressed because of my first day of work?

Was that why I am having this dream?

In reality, I really did have a job interview with W&U, got accepted and was awaiting my first day of work. It was also true that I wanted to be assigned to an actor.

The reason that I applied at W&U was also because they had a broad array of actors. Among those, there were a few with statuses similar to Hollywood actors with their box-office hits in the Chungmuro Avenue, some, although they played a small role, even acted in Hollywood.

After getting accepted into W&U, I was so excited and worried about what actor I would be assigned to the point where I had trouble sleeping.

But out of nowhere, a girl group?

Although I wasn’t sure of the name, I knew that there was a girl group associated with W&U. Since their establishment, they were strictly an actor management company, but a few years ago, they started to expand their lineup with idol groups.

Although they say the idol industry was like a red ocean, as long as you could stay afloat, the revenue was good.

They first contracted an 11-member boy idol group and as if they had saved a country in their past life, they were a huge success as soon as they released their first album. I had read in a W&U article that they were known as the Monster Rookies and that year they had won every rookie award.

I couldn't think of the name of the group, but I did remember their nickname. Since elementary school children were crazy about them, they were nicknamed 'ChoTongLeong'.

That year they were able to earn more than their initial investment and were raking in money.

As W&U was greatly encouraged by their success, they decided to reinvest the revenue earned from the boy idol group and began an in-house system to earnestly raise new recruits. They soon revealed a new idol group.

That was all I knew. As I didn't read anything about them in the W&U articles, I guess they flopped. As I wasn't really interested in them, I never looked them up.

Since I was going to be assigned to an actor, not a girl group.

"I guess that was the fateful encounter with Neptune."

Neptune?

Its name reminded me of a once-famous TV animated beautiful female warrior.

“I guess you were quite flustered at that time.”

“As soon as I heard it, I thought I was doomed. If you look at the results, it was a failure. I was completely blacklisted on my first day.”

“What? You were blacklisted?”

“That time I had just taken my first steps in the ‘real world’ and it definitely must have shown on my face that I wasn’t happy with the arrangements so there was no way my first impression was good. If I think about it now, from that moment, I stepped onto the path of hardship. Although they say I stubbornly struggled my way to the top, if I didn’t get off on the wrong side of the bed on my first day, it wouldn’t have been that bad.”

“…Woah, Jung Sunwoo!”

My head was heavy and my chest felt tight. It felt like I was underwater for a long time and finally came up to breathe. As I looked down, I saw a seat belt tightly pressing down on my chest. I undid the seat belt and coughed.

The person next to me patted my shoulder.

Who was it?

Ah, my brother. Thick horn-rimmed glasses and a plain face. It was my brother. As I looked at my surrounding, there were no traces of a large, fabulous office.

It was the inside of my brother's car.

"What?"

"What do you mean what. We're here. As a guy on his first day of work, you should get your head in the game. You can't stare blankly in front of your sunbaes. I am not sure about managers, but in any job, a new recruit needs to be quick on their feet."

"I wasn't staring blankly; I think I just dozed off."

"Like hell , ou were dozing off, you were talking to me just ten seconds ago. Your eyes were open as well."

What?

"What are you talking about. I even had a dream."

"You're telling me you fell asleep in ten seconds and even had a

dream?”

Hyung smirked. Even when I thought about it, it was weird.

However, I definitely had a dream. Not just a regular dream, I had a lucid dream. I could clearly remember the events that unfolded in my dream.

An enormous office. An older me. Director Park. Reporter Song. Girl Group Neptune, who debuted two years ago.

But I was talking normally just ten seconds ago? Was it even possible to fall asleep suddenly even if I wasn’t narcoleptic?

How weird.

“Maybe I fainted because I was too tired... even the dream was strange.”

“What kind of dream?”

“I was the chairman of a management company.”

“That’s a lucky dream!”

“No, only that part was good. I was taken back when I was interviewed about my past... on my first day of work, I was

assigned to a girl group instead of an actor. And I was blacklisted by a sunbae... Damn it. It was definitely a silly dream."

My brother laughed as air escaped from his lungs.

"Girl group? That's not bad. I think that will be fun."

"Like hell it will be fun."

"You're good at taking care of kids. Wouldn't it be similar?"

"Nonsense. And I don't really want to be a manager of an idol group."

It was not that I didn't like idols. Girl groups were nice. They were pretty, cute and sexy. How great was that. However, I don't want to be their manager. I felt that raising an idol group would be similar as being a cog in a factory machine. Idols would just be the standardized product from that factory.

On the other hand, raising an actor felt like a handcrafted product. It didn't matter if he was respected by the public or not, he would still be a one-of-a-kind work of art.

Of course, that was only my opinion.

"As long as you are working for them, I hope you get assigned to an actress that you like. Wish you luck."

“Hopefully.”

I checked my watch and opened the car door.

“I’m gonna go to work now. Since it’s your first day, you should go early and understand the situation.”

“Okay. I’ll call you when I’m done. Let’s have a drink tonight?”

I asked my brother as I made a shot drinking gesture.

“What time is it now?”

“Early morning… 3:30?”

“You’re starting awfully early today and you think you’ll be able to leave on time?”

My brother and I laughed wholeheartedly.

It was still dark outside. As if dark clouds covered the stars and the moon, the sky was gloomy. There was still a lot of time before the day brightens up. Although I knew that in this industry there were no regular start and end times, but I never imagined I would go to work this early in the morning.

“Anyways, I’ll call you when I can. Thanks for the ride, brother.”

“Sure. Fighting!”

As I get out of the car, the cold, stale morning air completely woke my mind up.

After stretching, I made my way through the forest of building in Cheongdam-dong.

Overtechnology seems to be a VR type technology the author made up

Chungmuro Avenue is known as the street of culture, artists and film in Korea

Red Ocean is a term to define cutthroat markets, where companies try their best to outperform their competitors

ChoTongLeong is a word made up from Cho (from Elementary School) TongLeong (from President) meaning President of Elementary Schoolers

Sunbae mean senior in a professional environment

Cheongdam-dong is a ward of Gangnam district, a very wealthy area in Korea

Chapter 2: Management Business Department Team 3, New Manager (2)

Many of the windows of the building were still lit at this time of day. The streets had quite a bit of traffic and people were walking around.

Unable to tell if they were going to or leaving from work, people were hastily walking on the streets early in the morning.

On the bench in front of convenience store, there was a person drinking a can of coffee. A loosely hung necktie, messy hair and beside him, there was a suitcase. It might have been a daily routine for him, but it somehow seemed cool to me.

I wasn't sure if I was nervous or excited. Anyhow, it felt good. A student, a soldier, a part-time worker and a job applicant, this wasn't any of the 'half-jobs' I had till now, I had become a real salaryman.

Going to an office, leaving an office and drinking coffee while talking about issues around the world with colleagues during our break, that kind of salaryman. That sort of a member of society. A working man.

I'll buy a car as soon as I save some money.

The unique appearance of the W&U, in-between similar buildings, caught my eye. In front of a glass door, I double-checked

my appearance. I was wearing the suit my brother bought me as my graduation gift, the polka-dotted necktie and dress shoes my mom bought me. The dandy and favorable impression giving off a new employee look was verified by my nephews and my sister-in-law.

I thought of the brief encounter I had with my older self in a dream. Compared to him, the present me looked sloppy. I looked much more composed and dignified in my dream.

A chairman of a successful management company. A powerful man.

My current self was a far cry away from the appearance in my dream. Well, probably because it was obviously a dream.

Since I was a child, I loved movies and dramas. And I loved the actors that lived in that world. When I was in middle school, I filled my room with card stocks and postcards of Korean and International actors and actresses. In high school and university, I have filled my phone's photo gallery with them. Even when I was a soldier, my locker was filled with actresses rather than girl groups.

I loved them and I yearned to be a part of their world.

In the entertainment world.

It was an obvious choice when I decided to partake in that world.

The reason why I chose to become a manager instead of a celebrity was because of my personality. Instead of being in the spotlight, I found it more interesting developing someone who would stand in that spotlight. Even while watching movies and dramas, I found myself more focused on the supporting characters than the main characters themselves. The characters who moved within a story while not getting the attention.

With my own two hands, I wanted to produce a top star who would be acknowledged not just within Korea, but throughout the world.

Within the W&U, I could learn and gain experience while working in the management team. And when I get older, I could liberate myself from the company with my actors and actresses and start my own management company, and become the chairman. Becoming the person who I was in my dream.

That was my ambition.

Today, I was able to make my first step towards my dream.

I took a deep breath before opening the door and headed in. No one was there. It was even pitch black. There was only a blinking light in the direction of where I was headed.

What floor was I supposed to go again?

As I approached the front of the elevator, I heard the sound of a

girl humming somewhere.

Oh God. I might have gotten a heart attack. Shit, it was my ringtone. It was the soundtrack from a horror movie I was impressed by during the summer. I didn't think this song was that scary. Who the fuck calls at 3 in the morning?

As I took out my phone, it was from an unknown number.

"Hello?"

– Are you Jung Sunwoo who is supposed to start work today?

"Yes. Speaking."

I bowed my head out of habit.

– My name is Kim Hyunjo. I'm the chief of Management Team 3, are you on your way?

"I've just arrived, but what floor was I supposed to go to?"

-I'm on the 2nd floor of the underground parking lot. I'll meet you there. We need to leave right away.

"Yes, I understand. I'll get there right away."

I quickly took the elevator. The mirror attached to the door reflected my face. A stiff, nervous face. I needed to make a good impression.

I tried to force a smile while looking at the mirror. He wouldn't spit on a smiling face.

As I arrived on the 2nd underground floor, I heard a car honk. A man came out of a black van. Some distinct features stood out.

First, he was thin and short. His slender figure made him look like a student from a far.

On the other hand, he had a haggard appearance. I wasn't sure if he just didn't shave properly or if he just didn't shave at all, but I was able to see stumbles on his chin. He had dark circles that stretched down to his chin. He seemed like he had went through all sorts of hardships to become an veteran manager...

I didn't expect my supervisor to be angel-like, but he didn't seem like he had a good personality.

As I took a look at Hyunjo, he glanced at me as if he was scanning me.

"Are you Jung Sunwoo?"

"Yes. Feel free to talk to me however you want, chief."

“For now, this is more comfortable.”

He seemed uncomfortable.

Also, the fact he said, for now, seemed a bit odd.

“But… You came dressed in a suit? Didn’t someone remind you to dress comfortably as you would be working on the field right away?”

“…No.”

I just received a message about when and where to go for my first day of work.

Since it was my first day of work, I even took my time on deciding what to wear. But, looking at Hyunjo, he was wearing a sports jacket and jeans. He was also wearing a cap. He was dressed the complete opposite of me.

I quickly removed my tie and shoved it in my bag.

Hyunjo roughly scratched the back of his head.

“Suit and dress shoes… If you work with those kids, you need to run around to take care of them all day long and most of the time you even need to wait for them all night long inside the car. But,

you won't be able to work properly with a suit on. Starting tomorrow, dress more comfortably. Ah, even if I said comfortably, I will kill you if you wear stretched out sweatpants and squeaky slippers."

I'm doomed. How bad was my first appearance?

"Comfortable, but not sloppy. Do you get what I mean?"

"Yes, I underst..."

"There, that guy dressed properly for the job."

Looking behind me, Hyunjo waved his hand. When I turned around, I saw a man who looked similar to my age. He quickly came out of the elevator and walked towards us. A man that seemed to be the kind of person who would kindly answer you when you ask for directions. A face which appeared to be smiling even if it really wasn't. He even had dimples. Shit, Shit.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Chae Gunyoung."

"I'm Jung Sunwoo. Hello."

"So great to meet you."

After shaking hands, Hyunjo took a look at both, Gunyoung and me.

“Between the two of you, I heard one had experience, it’s Gunyoung right?”

Gunyoung nodded.

“Feel free to talk to me however you want, chief. It’s embarrassing to say that I have experience. I worked part-time under Blackout manager hyung for 3 months. I only drove the car, did the chores and stopped people from taking photos, but that was all.”

“That’s still good. Ah, then you should know Hojun hyung. Chief Lee Hojun.”

“I have met him a few times.”

Blackout. As I heard it, it came to me. The successful boy group of W&U, the ‘ChoTongLeong’ idol group. They were called Blackout. The company he worked part-time for 3 months was this one.

Damn it. It seemed as though everything was crooked from the start. The outfit I spent a lot of time on was turned down and the new colleague I was compared to already had 3 months of experience.

If I’m not careful, he could be recognized as the sharp, fast, sensible, new recruit. And, me as the slow and insensible type of new recruit.

“First, both of you get in the car. We need to pick them up, get them to the shop and drop them off at the music program rehearsal by 7am. Let’s talk about more specific details on our way there.”

I was too lost to realize what was odd about what he said.

Of course, Hyunjo sat in the driver’s seat and Gunyoung sat beside him. I moved quickly as I sat in the backseat. I quickly took off my jacket and shoved it in my bag, loosened my buttons on my shirt and folded the sleeves up right up to my elbow. It was only then my outfit looked a bit more comfortable.

As the van entered the highway, we started to talk more about the specifics.

The specifics that shocked my ears.

“Starting today, Gunyoung and Sunwoo will be in charge of the group called Neptune. They are a 4-member girl group that debuted early last year. Have you heard of them?”

“Yes. I listened to their single album not so long ago.”

Gunyoung replied right away.

“The reactions didn’t seem that bad.”

“Not bad? The single dropped off the charts right away and disappeared.”

“Really? Because the group members are all pretty, they were often talked about in an online community I go on.”

“Is that so? They are really pretty. Since we were originally a company in charge of actors and actresses, when we decided to make a girl group, we decided to pick those with actress like appearance. But, that doesn’t mean that they don’t have the skills. They were mostly trainees for a long time in a different company. We even thought of the oversea market before choosing them so they are capable of speaking other languages. Since they have the basics, if they just make a hit, they will go a long way, but that hit didn’t happen for the last two years. Are they just unlucky, or do we just not have enough experience with planning…”

I wasn’t able to cut in their conversation. I was completely lost.

The girl group Neptune which debuted two years ago. I was in charge of a girl group instead of an actor or an actress.

The things I heard from my dream were becoming true, they were really happening. Can this really happen? Is this what I think it is? A déjà vu?

“What about you, Sunwoo? Is this the first time you have heard of them?”

I made eye contact with Hyunjo through the rearview mirror.

“Ah… Yes.”

Because of my slow reply, he clicked his tongue.

“If you look behind you and search through the index file, you will see it contains all of their profiles. Take one. Since it takes about 15 minutes for us to arrive at their lodging, take a good look at it. Or, search online. You need to at least know their names and their faces before meeting them.”

“Yes. I understand.”

As I lifted the index file, there were a couple of thick profiles booklets. I took one booklet out. Even if I was still a bit confused, my hands moved automatically.

“So Gunyoung, do you have any siblings?”

“I have an older brother and a younger brother. I’m the second oldest.”

“Ah, I’m also the second oldest. The second oldest are usually more self-determined and quick-witted. For this job, the qualities you need the most are determination and quick-wits. It’s not easy to constantly be with 4 young girls all day long. Do you have any

siblings, Sunwoo?”

“Yes. I have one older brother.”

“You’re the youngest? Thought so.”

Thought so?

My mind started.

What was I doing right now? Déjà vu or not, this wasn’t the time to think about my dream. Hyunjo was starting to think of me as a joke. If I don’t straighten up my first impression right now, I’ll have a miserable life ahead.

I was worried that my life ahead will be full of hardships as I ruined my impression on the very first day.

Korean proverb meaning you don’t mistreat someone who treats you nicely

Shop refers to a makeover salon, where celebrities get their hair and makeup done

Chapter 3: Management Business Department Team 3, New Manager (3)

No, I can't let it go on like this. I can't let all my preparations go to waste.

"My brother is 10 years older than me."

Hyunjo sighed as he heard my words.

"So you're the youngest by a large age gap. Being the youngest with such a large age difference, you must have gotten pretty spoiled growing up. Then this kind of work would be hard for you..."

It was a common misconception.

You must have been well-cared for. Everyone must have spoiled you. I can tell you're the young master type just by looking at you. You probably don't have any guts.

Comments like these. I had heard plenty of them in the army.

However, I found this unfair.

"My brother married when I was in middle school."

“Pardon?”

“The following year, when my sister-in-law went to the pregnancy clinic, they found out that she was pregnant with quadruplets. “

“What…”

I still remembered the day our lives were flipped upside down. It was hard to tell if my brother, who was always quiet and dull as dried fish, was laughing or crying.

Mother, father, they said quadruplets. Hahahaha… ha…

Hyunjo and Gunyoung looked at me with wide eyes.

“My sister-in-law was planning on quitting her job to focus on the baby, however with four babies, she couldn’t quit. They needed both of their incomes to barely cover the cost of baby formula.”

“Th-that’s true. With four kids, just the cost of diapers and formulas would be incredible.”

“So eventually, the babies were left with my mother, but she was unable to take care of them by herself.”

“Ahhh…”

“So I ended up helping out. During middle school, I spent my time changing their diapers and soothing them, during high school and university, I was pretty much a constant babysitter. Because my body constantly smelled of baby formula, my nickname was once ‘JungJumma’. Hahaha.”

“Uh…”

“So it’s true that I am the youngest, but I didn’t grow up with that sort of treatment.”

“Yaah… You must have had to endure quite a lot. If you raised four kids, taking care of the members of a girl group must be nothing to you.”

It was as planned.

With this, I was able to avoid the bad first impression I had in my dream. In some ways, it was a relief. If I didn’t have that dream, the only thing on my mind right now would have been, ‘girl group? I’m screwed, screwed, so screwed, what do I do?’

But I really was screwed.

I was still shocked and dazed by the fact I was assigned to a girl group. However, I couldn’t just quit because I was unhappy.

W&U was the best out of all the companies I applied to.

Compared to other companies, the salary was good and there was much to learn from the way they tried to develop themselves in a foreign market while accounting for failure.

Above all, their system for promotions for road managers was much more systematic and stable. This was the biggest advantage. In those hit-or-miss companies, there were rumors that managers might simply drive for several years without a promotion.

There was no guarantee that if I quit, I would be able to find a better job and since it was already decided, it wouldn't be a bad idea to check out the music and entertainment fields beforehand. Many actors would end up appearing on entertainment shows anyways. While assigned to the girl group, I could gain experience and there may be a chance to get assigned to an actor later on.

Might... damn it.

I picked up the profiles for Neptune.

Girl group. The unfamiliar pronunciation rolled off my tongue. The girl groups I knew were the incredibly famous ones or the ones I saw in the army. Besides those, I knew of the few that appeared in various movies or dramas.

Among those, there were none named Neptune.

Neptune.

After the boy group, Blackout, jumped straight to stardom, this was the second idol group W&U put their heart and soul into. A 4-member girl group. They had debuted 2 years ago.

The members each had the appearance to be responsible for the visual of the group.

Looking at their profile pictures, they were all beauties who each had their own unique charm. I tried to look to see if I had ever seen any of them before, but it would only tire my eyes. After carefully reading the last page, I shoved the profile into my bag.

I thought about my dream again.

Anyhow, could a lucid dream be used so splendidly? It was not like I was possessed by a spirit. Even if we say I somehow got the part about getting assigned to a girl group right, wasn't it too chilling for me to get their debut year as well as the name right?

Wait. Could it be?

While I was searching articles related to W&U. I could have skimmed by a girl group named Neptune and their debut year.

I might not have remembered it, perhaps it was lodged in my subconscious and manifested in my dream. At least it was more believable than a lucid dream.

Although looking at the successful future self, it wouldn't be bad if it was a lucid dream...

"Mr. Sunwoo, did you finish reading the profile?"

"Yes, I read it all."

After selling out my brother's quadruplets, Hyunjo's tone became softer.

"Our management team 3 is the hardest team in W&U. Physically, mentally and emotionally. If you work someone for a while here, you can tell. That guy is going to last, that other guy is going to quit."

As the mood became more serious, I sat up properly.

"All the new recruits have big dreams of becoming the chairman of a major company, what a load of bull, out of ten, seven or eight will quit within a year. The ones at the top may be like, 'Kids these days don't even have the basics' or 'Back in my day, it was much harder'... however, it makes sense. These days, almost everyone joins after they have graduated university. Did I study all those years to become a driver for young girls and get them kimbab? Why wouldn't they think that."

"..."

“You earn a small salary while your health degrades as you aren’t able to properly take care of yourself. On top of that, there is a countless number of people who like to flaunt their position. We’re constantly stuck lowering our heads, politely addressing them as Producer, Writer and Director. You definitely think about quitting a least a few times a day.”

Gunyoung and I blankly listened to his words.

Was he implying that it is hard to succeed in this line of work so to just quit now?

I did apply since I really wanted to work in this industry. It wasn’t like I just recklessly decided to follow my fantasies. There wasn’t anyone who didn’t know that the job of a manager was tough. I also heard that the entertainment industry was a cheap and dirty place to work.

“Do you know why I am telling you both this?”

We read each other’s eyes and answered differently.

“Since you’re our senior, so you wanted to give us advice…”

“Since we need to know the reality before we face…”

“If you’re going to quit, quit early.”

“…Pardon?”

“What do I become if you quit after I train you both. I need to recruit new employees and train them again. So if you don’t think you can keep up, quit even a day earlier and go your own path. Don’t stay uncertain for 2 weeks or a month and make me more tired.”

Wow. This was my first day.

I hope not all new employees have to hear this.

“If you’re going to stay, do a good job, okay?”

“I understand.”

“Yes.”

I haven’t even started work and I was already exhausted. My chest felt stuffy as if a heavy rock was inside it. We didn’t speak a word while driving for 5 minutes.

“We’re here, it’s that small apartment.”

The van stopped in front of the apartment. I thought that there would be something special about an idol’s residence, but there wasn’t much.

Gunyoung commented while getting out of the van.

“It’s very different from Blackout’s residence.”

“You can’t compare them. They have obsessive stalkers. If they were to live in a place like this with a shabby security system, it would be chaotic.”

“That’s true… Stalkers are quite scary these days.”

“They give me goosebumps. One time, someone told me that when they came home after work, they found a fan in their closet. There are plenty of psychos.”

I looked around and asked.

“I guess Neptune doesn’t have any fans like those?”

“They don’t. How could they have stalkers when they don’t even have regular ones. However, even after they become popular, girl groups don’t have as much of a hard time as boy groups because of stalkers. There are occasionally some crazy bastards that run over to touch them during a signing event or celebratory events. Perverted bastards.”

Hyunjo loathingly entered the apartment. Gunyoung and I closely followed behind.

Our eyes met as I looked to the side. I felt a hint of both awkwardness and comradery. We laughed at the same time. The dimples on Gunyoung's cheek became more pronounced. I felt the same way the first time we met, but I feel like he has a great personality. I wondered what was his impression of me. I hoped I was at least not a jackass in his eyes.

I stuck my hand out first.

"I am 27."

"Oh? So am I. '08 graduate. Should we talk casually since we're the same age?"

"Yeah."

I would have to get to know him more, but I felt that he wasn't such a bad guy.

We took the elevator and went up to the fifth floor. Hyunjo didn't even knock and entered the passcode on the door.

Click.

The hallway was still dark. After struggling to take off my shoes, I entered. Maybe it was because it was a girl group's residence, but I felt like I walked into a whole different world.

Honestly, I was nervous. It wasn't just me, Gunyoung, who was behind me, showed clear signs of being nervous.

As Hyunjo turned on the lights, the hallway instantly brightened.

It wasn't very big. It was much better than my one-room, but it seemed like it would be too crowded for four people. A cute, round sofa. The character cushions and dolls spread on top. A cream colored rug. It showed clear traces that only girls lived here.

"Girls! Wake up and get ready! We have to get to the shop by 5!"

Bang bang!

Hyunjo knocked on each door twice.

The first door to open was the one left of the veranda.

"Oppa, you're here early."

Wow.

Wow...

It was like when you watch a movie or a drama where the screen brightens up so the female lead looks incredibly beautiful. It was the secret filter used when the producer really wanted to push the

lead or if there were some revisions made…

That was the scene in front of my eyes.

JungJumma is taken from Jung Sunwoo and ahjumma (Korean for married woman)

Kimbab is Korean sushi rolls. Very common food, you can buy it pretty much anywhere.

Korean homes nowadays don’t have keys. They use passcodes to enter (Myoni is sincerely jealous).

Oppa is what a younger female calls an older male

Chapter 4: Management Business Department Team 3, New Manager (4)

As if the woman, girl, woman or whoever had just gotten out of the shower, her wet hair was covered with a towel.

It felt as though sexiness and innocence coexisted perfectly. She was pretty, yet had unique features.

Praise came out naturally. Out of all the people I have seen in real life, she was the prettiest. There was an enormous gap between first and second.

She should have been an actress, not a singer.

“Maknae woke up the earliest again. You practiced until late yesterday, aren’t you tired?”

“I need work even if I’m tired… It’s the first broadcast in a long time.”

“Lee Songha, you’ve grown.”

The youngest member of Neptune, Lee Songha.

On her profile, it said she had just graduated high school this spring. Even in Neptune, where everyone was responsible for the visual, she was superior. Mood breaker, even her blank stares

looked as if she was lost in thought.

It said her position was sub-vocal and sub-dancer, I think I need to study more about these positions. Although I know the positions for soccer and baseball, it was my first time dealing with girl group positions. I didn't know that the positions were so specifically divided. It was to the point of culture shock.

"Oppa. When do we leave?"

"We have to leave at 4:30. 30 minutes left."

"Okay."

Even her voice was good. Since she was a singer, she was good at projecting her voice and pronunciation. Above all, she had a good rhythm in her speech. It had the addictiveness of getting stuck in the ears of the listeners.

That's rare.

If she was an actress, I would have gathered all her previous works, it was unfortunate.

Songha rubbed her tired eyes and approached me. Drops of water dripped from her hair, which was simply covered with a towel. My hand flinched as I subconsciously wanted to wipe the drops. She stopped right in front of me.

Is this the right time to say hello?

Just as I was thinking that, Songha nodded her head. Before I could even say hello, she tilted her long, white neck and looked over my shoulder.

“Please move a little.”

“Yes? Ah, yes.”

It seemed she had some business with the refrigerator behind me. After I moved aside, Songha opened the freezer and took out a container of ice cream. It had “Lee Songha’s” written in thick permanent marker.

I thought those kinds of things only happened in families with quadruplets...

“Everyone get up!”

Hyunjo shouted again.

“What are the unnis doing while maknae is already up and ready!”

That appearance overlapped with my previous self who had to wake up the quadruplets and send them off to daycare before going

to school.

Haaa... It was war. It was an endless battle, if I woke one up, another would slump on the sofa and sleep, if I woke another one, another one would crawl back into her blanket... Damn. Let's stop thinking about those kids. It didn't seem like I was a fresh new recruit, but an exhausted working daddy!

"Good morning..."

The door with a dinosaur sticker opened. Messy, curly hair. A woman wearing yellow one-piece pajamas came out rubbing her eyes with her head bowed.

She's Im Seoyoung.

She's 21. Her position is sub-vocal. Lead dancer. On her profile, it said that she had a lovely baby face and a voluptuous body.

That really was the case. If you didn't know them, you'd think she was the youngest, not Songha. She looked like a high schooler.

She was even responsible for entertainment shows. In a program I have never heard of, she momentarily appeared as a guest reporter. In a group that was obscure as Neptune, she was the young breadwinner who was busy attempting to raise their popularity.

"Oppa..."

“Yeah. Wake up, quickly.”

The totteringly walking Seoyoung suddenly opened her eyes.

“Songha. You’re gonna get fat. Do you know how much calories that is?”

Songha, who was scooping up ice cream while standing, briefly glanced at Seoyoung before turning her back. She hugged the ice cream container as if she was trying to hide it, but still continued to dig in.

“You think I can’t see it just because you eat like that?”

“Then, unni shouldn’t look.”

“How can I not look at my favorite food!”

“Then do you want a bite?”

“Don’t tempt me! I’ll get fat!”

“Yak yak yak, nagging so early in the morning…”

“Yak yak yak? To your unni? Wah, oppa, look at the way she talks to me. She doesn’t try to lose, not even once. If you were in a

different team, they would insult you every day for your ill-manners, then you'd be crying in a corner and eventually quit. Do you know how many girls there are who have bad personalities? You should know that you are only able to live so luxuriously since you joined our team."

The lovely Seoyoung was actually responsible for the nagging of this household. As the nagging continued to go on, Hyunjo pushed Seoyoung towards the bathroom.

"Hurry up and wash while I wake the others up. Want something light... like an apple?"

"Yup yup! Thanks, oppa!"

After finally getting Seoyoung in the bathroom, Hyunjo sighed.

"Two down, I still have to wake the other two. So can one of you peel an apple?"

"I'll do it."

I raised my hand. I had confidence in this. I found two large apples in the fruit drawer of the fridge and a fruit knife in the corner of the sink. Soon, a thin paper-like rind was peeled off smoothly.

Look at it, look. Even when I looked at it, I couldn't help, but to appreciate the level of skill.

The spectating Gunyoung applauded.

“Work of art.”

“If you summed up all the fruits I’ve peeled; you’ll probably get an orchard.”

While preparing snacks for the quadruplets, you naturally become a master at peeling… stop already. This is excessive, really.

After peeling the apples, I placed them on a plate and stuck a fork in a slice. At the same time, the other members of Neptune had woken up. The blond mixed-race main rapper LJ. And the oldest in the group, the main vocal. The charismatic leader, Lee Taehee.

That’s what it said in the profiles…

Taehee was scratching her stomach with her hand inside her shirt. While Hyunjo was busy waking everyone up, she nonchalantly sat on the sofa and nodded off. LJ was stretching and eating apples in front of me.

“This is yummy. It’s sweet.”

“You have a lot. If it’s not enough, I can peel some more for you.”

Why does it feel like I became a food demonstrator at a grocery

store?

Well, if a Barbie doll was sampling my food, it would be worth it. If Taehee had the body of a model with long legs, LJ had a perfect hourglass figure. Her voluptuous breasts and the S-line figure that follows through her waist, hips and her legs which seem to extend endlessly from her training shorts made her seem unrealistic.

Being assigned to a girl group was good. It was very good.

“Hey, give me my apples!”

“I don’t want to?”

As soon as Seoyoung, who had just finished washing herself, urgently yelled, LJ picked up the last slice and teased her. As if their arguments were a common occurrence, Hyunjo didn’t even attempt to stop them and sighed. Eventually, I had to peel more apples.

While the members washed, changed their clothes and got ready, Gunyoung and I were waiting like bags of barley.

After seeing the familiar scene of the quadruplets from Neptune members, I became less nervous. However, Gunyoung was still stiff.

“I really can’t adjust to this.”

“I know, right? I guess it’s because it’s our first day.”

Gunyoung covered his mouth and spoke in a quiet voice.

“I graduated from a male-only middle school, high school and university. I don’t even have a nuna or a younger sister.”

“If that’s the case, you really will have a hard time adjusting.”

“Right? But it’s still good.”

“Really good.”

We worked hard to cover the tips of our lips from curving upwards.

As soon as the girls gathered in the living room, Hyunjo clapped his hands.

“Now that everyone is up, let’s say our greetings. They will be staying with us for a while.”

“What, you changed the manager oppa again?”

“What happened to Chulhyoung oppa?”

“That bastard is in hiding. He even changed his phone number.”

“Really? That’s too much. He should have let us know before quitting.”

“Don’t say that bastard’s name. It pisses me off.”

“But I thought this would happen. He was sullen and always looked at my legs.”

As Seoyoung complains, LJ skimmed over her legs.

“Don’t worry about your legs. Look at how many legs there are here, why would he look at yours?”

“What?”

When the two who were the same age fought, the leader, Taehee didn’t even try to resolve it. She was the type of leader that let things resolve by themselves. And Songha was carefully nibbling on the apple core for some time.

“The conversation is going nowhere again. I said to greet each other. We don’t have much time.”

Hyunjo patted my back. I gulped down my saliva and tried my best to smile.

“Hello, my name is Jung Sunwoo.”

“He’s… much older than you and his nickname is Jungjumma.”

“Chief, that’s an old nickname…”

Seoyoung raised her hand.

“Question! Why is your nickname Jungjumma?”

“He said his brother had quadruplets and he had to be the babysitter.”

“Wow.”

It wasn’t my intention, but the story of the quadruplets helped here as well. The members looked up at me. I hope my image was okay.

“And this is Choi Gunyoung. He worked briefly with Blackout.”

“Cough, Hello. I am Choi Gunyoung.”

Neptune members introduced themselves one after the other. I heard that there are some celebrities who swear at their managers to release stress. Luckily, it seemed like they wouldn’t do such a thing.

Was it because they weren't popular yet? Would they change once they became popular?

Since they were younger than us, we decided to speak casually, but I still had to prepare my heart. It was the first time seeing beauties of this level, four of them at that, so close to me. Maybe if they were moderately pretty, but currently I felt pressured since they were too pretty.

I'll probably slowly get used to it.

Wait. If I get used to it, wouldn't it be a problem if my standards rise?

"Now that we've introduced ourselves, let's move. Get up."

Hyunjo urged as he looked at his watch. All of us lifted our butts and got up.

"Is it cold out, oppa?"

"It's a bit chilly. Wear something on top before you come out."

The members covered their slim shoulders with outerwear or a blanket before going out.

The sky was still dark.

It would take 30 minutes to get to the shop in Chungdam-dong. 2 hours passed as the artists did their hair and makeup.

As their managers, we had to wait and keep an eye on their blankets and their bags during that time.

Hyunjo was sleeping, Gunyoung was dozing off and I was yawning while I looked at my phone. I was gathering information on Neptune. I saved some good pictures and monitored their broadcasts. I downloaded their songs and continuously listened to them.

In the past 2 years, Neptune released four albums. One was a full album, the other was a mini-album with 4 songs and the rest were digital singles.

They all failed. There were more than 10 songs and I haven't heard of even one them.

I didn't think their title track was bad though.

Especially their current single, the hook was very addicting. Looking at their album information, the composer seemed familiar. That meant that the composer was familiar enough to me to be famous.

Their dance was good enough to stare blankly at it for 3 minutes and their music videos showed that the company had spent quite a

lot of money. However, when I looked through all the music charts, I couldn't find any of their songs.

Why weren't they popular?

Was there something else they needed? Besides good songs and good looks? Was it really bad luck?

There was a girl group in the past who could lift the whole industry up and down. They were an unknown group for a while, however, a video of them became viral and their songs became the number 1 hit on the charts.

Their song was that good, they were a group that was going to succeed. The ones who deserved to be successful will eventually become successful, these were words they said but they could only say this since they had already become famous.

This type of situation wasn't uncommon. As expected, even if they had the looks or good songs, they still needed luck. That's really..... It wasn't like they could just buy it, nor was it something they could gain through hard work. Idol contractors must have a hard time.

No, if you think about it, this didn't just apply to idols. There were probably plenty of unsuccessful actors who had good looks and were good at acting. Many of the top actors and actresses who had a slew of box office hits had times when they were unknown... Hmm. I guess I should gather more information about how these people became successful.

At 7, we went out to buy some food. Since they told me to go to the convenience store and buy whatever there was to eat, I bought plenty of boxed lunches and salads and returned with bulging bags. This was our breakfast. Looking at this, it looked like I wouldn't be able to proper take care of my meals while working here.

Once the members were done with their makeup, they were stuffed back into the van. Today's schedule was a music program on a cable network.

Kpop Concert. KpopCon for short.

Since the quadruplets were avid viewers, I ended up watching a few shows as well. A group swarmed out, performed their song and returned, another would swarm out and do their dance and return. To me, they all looked the same, but it was surprising to see the quadruplets name each of them...

The van drove along the Olympic Highway as we made our way to Sangam-dong. The traffic was congested with cars going to work.

When I looked out the window to yawn, I realized the sky had turned bright.

Right, it was morning.

Although it felt like it was the afternoon, we were just starting

our day.

Maknae means youngest

Unni is what a younger woman calls an older woman

Nuna is what a younger man calls an older woman

Chapter 5: What It Means To Be A Music Program (1)

"It's morning, but there are a lot of people in front of the studio."

As soon as they arrived at the studio, Gunyoung stuck his head out the back seat window. Unlike before, I was in the driver's seat while Gunyoung was at the back. And next to him was LJ, in full make-up, tapping her foot with her legs crossed.

It was a little unfair.

"Ah... Most of them are here for BYG. They have a comeback today."

"The live broadcast is at night, but they are already waiting?"

"BYG will have to come for rehearsal as well. They are waiting for them to come so they can take pictures."

There were many fans holding camcorders and huge cameras crowding the front of the studio. I thought only kids did these things, but most were adults. There were even women in heels who looked like they were going to work.

"Those 'Someone's work outfit preview' pictures on Twitter are all uploaded by those Chikduk."

“Chikduk?”

What are these work outfit previews and what is this Chikduk?

“Picture taking Dukhu. Some of them take better quality pictures than those you find on new articles. Some take pictures to share, while others create a photo book to sell to other fans.”

Our pictures were taken while we were on our way inside after parking the van. I was nervous as I imagined people jumping over the fence to ask for autographs and handshakes, but in reality, it was embarrassingly quiet.

While they did look at us, no one shouted out our names. On the other hand, Neptune members were happily greeting other group’s fans.

“Hello everyone, we are Neptune!”

“We’re Neptune!”

As the four brightly smiled and waved their hands, the amount of people taking pictures grew. A few even returned their greetings.

“What are you doing. Smile, both of you.”

Hyunjo poked the sides of Gunyoung and me. He already had a bright smile on his face.

“A post on Twitter saying ‘I saw Neptune today and they were pretty good’ is better than most publicity stunts.”

I kept greeting people, without knowing who they were.

“Ah, right. Also…”

As soon as we entered the lobby, Hyunjo advised us.

“You can’t swear in front of fans who come to watch the broadcast.”

“Sorry?”

“There are still some stereotypes that celebrity managers are gangsters, so we have to be careful. Just don’t do anything that turn into controversy. Don’t even touch anyone. ‘Today, the manager of Neptune or whatever pushed me. Just my luck.’ If comments like these are circulated, the image of our kids will worsen.”

“Ah… okay.”

“And keep greeting people.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who you have to greet?”

I was speechless. How would I know that?

“You don’t know?”

“Yes, I don’t.”

“Since you don’t know, just greet everyone you meet. Especially those with photo-badges, when you meet an employee, say these words exactly, ‘Hello, I am (name) from W&U. Currently, I am working with a girl group called Neptune. Please take care of us.’ Easy right? Memorize it.”

Gunyoung was already muttering the words as he memorized them. I did the same as we made our way to the waiting room. Hello, I am… Hello, I am….

As if this was funny, Seoyoung laughed behind me.

“You said you are Jung Sunwoo oppa?”

Who is Jung Sunwoo oppa? Oh, it’s me.

“Yeah.”

“Since you wore a suit, every person you greet is going to think you’re the chief. You look like Hyunjo oppa’s superior.”

“Ah… Do I? Do I?”

“You should have worn a necktie.”

“My necktie’s in my bag.”

Seoyoung laughed even harder. It felt like something was tickling my ears. Her laugh sounded completely different from how she sounded when she nagged her members. Her cotton candy-like sweet voice, her eyes that closed into half-moon shapes, she was very cute.

I just wanted to put her in my pock… Cough cough.

The waiting room for KpopCon was located in the basement. As we got off the elevator, there were tons of people bustling around already. I couldn’t tell who was a manager and who was a staff member just by looking. I couldn’t even tell the difference between back dancers and singers.

What was certain was that there was no one prettier than the members of Neptune, especially Songha. It wasn’t because I am working with them, really.

“Where is our dressing room?”

“Over there. Second last one at the end.”

Along the narrow hallway, there were doors spread tightly on either side. Neptune’s waiting room was the second last one on the right. A paper with ‘Neptune’ written on it was stuck on the door.

Curious as to how a studio waiting room might look like, I opened the door with anticipation...

It was a chicken coop. It was smaller than my one-room.

Wait. Four members of Neptune, three managers including myself, later, when stylists and makeup artists come to fix their makeup, there wasn’t going to be a place to sit.

If we were like this, how do those groups with 10 members or those with back dancers deal with this?

“This is better than sharing a room awkwardly with other groups. And later, if we have a location shoot or an event, we have to eat and sleep in the van. At that time, you will miss this waiting room.”

Seoyoung pouted at Hyunjo’s words.

“I don’t have to sleep or eat, I just hope we get a location shoot or an event.

“Be patient, that day will come. You guys will definitely become popular.”

“Really?”

“Really. You guys must be tired, go sleep.”

“We have to greet our seniors.”

“I’ll wake you up then, so just sleep.”

Neptune members covered themselves with their outerwear or blankets and nodded off to sleep on each other’s shoulders. With their full makeup on, they were definitely celebrities, but their sleeping faces looked like a child’s. Well, they are kids. The oldest here is 22.

“Don’t just stand there, both of you should get comfortable and sleep. We have to stay here until the broadcast is over.”

Hyunjo grabbed a chair and closed his eyes.

Looking at my watch, it was only a bit after 8. KpopCon’s live broadcast was at 7p.m. We had around 10 hours left. How should I spend my time in this windowless chicken coop? Should I sleep too? No, if I close my eyes, I don’t think I will be able to get back up... The only thing I could trust was my cellphone. If I knew it

was going to be like this, I would have brought my charger or some extra batteries.

Why did we have to come so early when the broadcast was at 7?

“Do you know what to do until the broadcast?”

Gunyoung scratched his chin as he answered.

“I don’t know… It’s my first time at a music program so I’m not certain.”

“Blackout didn’t go to any music programs?”

“When I worked part-time there, they were already done their music activities and were only doing events and autograph signing events. From what I heard, they do a dry rehearsal then wait, camera rehearsal then wait, while other groups were doing their preliminary broadcast, wait. After our turn, we wait until they announce first place… I think it’s something like that?”

What is that? It’s not like it’s neglect play.

Gunyoung looked around before lowering his voice.

“Those at a higher level seem to have other schedules between wait times. We probably won’t. We probably even have to eat in the waiting room.”

I felt suffocated. Even if it was a live broadcast, we had to wait 10 hours to do a 1-hour broadcast? Wasn't this too inefficient?

"After all this, how much do we get paid?"

"I don't know."

We talked in a small voice, but Hyunjo lifted his head when he heard those words.

"We get $100."

"Sorry?"

"$100."

"...So in total $400?"

Although it wasn't on a major broadcasting company, a major cable company was stingier than I had expected. Salon costs would probably be higher.

"No, in total $100. If we divide it, it would be $25 per person."

"..."

At first, I thought I had heard wrong. With that money, it would only pay for three meals. From 4 in the morning until 8 at night, it was a schedule that took up a whole day and they only give us $25 per person?

“Honestly, isn’t that too little?”

“Who here cares about that. And who does music programs for money? You accept the losses to promote yourself. We are lucky that we have a good company and Blackout to lean on, or else the Producer wouldn’t even us cram us into his program. There are countless of groups who aren’t able to appear on music programs when they make a comeback.”

“Ah…”

He taught us a few more things with a tired expression. Although there were some differences between music programs, at most we would receive $500. It didn’t matter how many members we had or if we had back dancers, the money would be the same.

Hair, makeup and the different outfits requested by each studio meant that they would have to spend a few thousand dollars. Unfortunately, new groups had no choice, but to make an appearance on TV and sing their songs to promote themselves.

“Rest a bit now. We haven’t even started.”

After thoroughly shocking Gunyoung and me, Hyunjo placed a

hat on his face.

Soon after, Gunyoung closed his eyes. It seemed like only I was truly shocked.

Looking through some news on the internet, I found that it may be worse than what Hyunjo said, but it definitely wasn't better.

While there were top idols who made upwards of $100, 000 per day and big companies with revenues of tens of millions, there were also girl groups who had to make their own outfits since they didn't have the money and small companies who would take private loans to debut their girl groups.

There were articles that said that if they flopped this time, they would have to go to Han river... This chairman seemed to have ultimately ended up bankrupt, I wonder what he's doing now.

As someone who dreamt of becoming the chairman of a management company, my heart is disturbed. I may not know much, but I will definitely never take out a private loan.

Closing the article, I once again searched for Neptune. Skipping past the ones I had already read, I looked at the comments on the articles or webpages I haven't seen yet.

Those articles were obviously promotional articles made by the company. I checked every single one for comments, but there were none. Not even a negative comment. If you excluded the

promotional articles, there were only on lists of groups performing on music programs or of brief appearances on cable entertainment programs.

After looking through for 30 minutes, I finally found one. On the general forums on a Car Community site, someone started a topic called, ‘They are pretty. Who are they?’ and uploaded a picture of the members.

-Neptune or Napkin, a completely failed girl group.

-Their visuals are top among the groups coming out these days? Is it just the photo?

-I approve if it’s not photoshopped.

‘I approve if it’s not photoshopped?’ Like hell, you approve. They look much better in person than in that picture.

Looking at these comments, I felt a bit sad. Even if they say you need heavenly luck to become successful enough to have the whole nation at their beck and call, they should at least have some popularity.

Let’s think as if I was the producer of Neptune. How could I promote them?

Their songs and concept seem to be good and above all, they all seem to have unique traits… Well, those traits weren’t of any use

outside of entertainment programs. So this was why they risked their lives to appear on broadcasts.

"What are you thinking about so seriously?"

Gunyoung, who kept opening and closing his eyes since a while ago, slowly woke up.

"I was wondering what Neptune would have to do to become famous."

"Hahaha. If there was a way, I'd like to know as well. Luck and timing are determining factors on whether a celebrity becomes a hit or miss. They say that celebrities are like clouds, you don't know which cloud the rain will fall from. Look at BYG, who knew they were going to be so popular."

"I still don't know why they are so popular. I can't follow kid's preferences these days."

As we talked quietly not to wake up the girls, someone poked Gunyoung's side. Turning around, we saw Hyunjo staring at us.

"Look at these critics. If you're not tired, stop chatting and go buy some coffee."

"Yes? Yes. Coffee?"

“Buy some snacks as well. Choose sensibly.”

After receiving the credit card, almost as if we were chased out, we left the waiting room. It seemed like there were a few more arrivals after we arrived as the hallway was packed. As we barely made our way through the crowd, a woman carrying a laptop bag suddenly barred our way.

“Oh? Chief!”

Chief?

“You are the Chief in charge of Blackout, right? I am Reporter Kim Sooyoung from CelebBridge. We met briefly at the autographing event before, do you remember me?”

The reporter struck a friendly conversation with Gunyoung.

This guy was even close to reporters. Suddenly, I felt Gunyoung’s 3 months of experience was enormous.

“Hello, Miss Reporter. Of course, I remember you.”

“Oh my god.”

“But I am not a chief, I am just a manager.”

“Oh, you were a manager. Anyways, why are you here? Does Blackout have a schedule at Knet today? Radio? Can you spare some time for an interview? It will just take a minute.”

“I am actually working with Neptune, a girl group from W&U.”

I asked in vain.

That was what was written on the reporter’s face. Ah fuck, I asked in vain.

“Oh, so that’s how it is. Then let’s see each other some other time.”

“Yes. Goodbye.”

Gunyoung was still friendly, but the reporter coldly turned and walked away. Soon, she approached another man.

“… Let’s just go buy some coffee.”

“Yeah.”

It seemed like this was the sorrow of being an unknown group’s manager.

Chikduk – Picture taking Dukhu

Dukhu – Korean version of Otaku, means the same thing (actually

taken from the Japanese language)

In Korea, we use casual and formal speech depending on who we talk to. In this case, Sunwoo first talked formally, then switched to casual speech. Another thing to note is that Hyunjo speaks formally to Sunwoo and Gunyoung and vice versa

Go to Han river is a common phrase meaning commit suicide by drowning in the Han river

Chapter 6: What It Means To Be A Music Program (2)

It was still crowded in front of the studio. It seemed like a very famous idol group had arrived as fans were screaming behind me.

Who is it? Fighting! Don't starve and eat something good! I will support you...

Although there were no jobs without titles, it seemed like the light shining on the entertainment world would cast an especially dark shadow.[1]

Well, they can do whatever they want. We searched around the studio for a coffee shop.

The cold air squeezed through my dress shirt. Even when I rubbed my arms, it was to little avail. Damn. With what mind did I decide to wear a suit. Since I dreamt about the future, it could have at least told me not to wear a suit.

"Brrr... It's cold. It's only October, but the weather is cold all of a sudden."

"I know, right? Seems like we'll have to wear winter clothes soon."

Gunyoung hunched his shoulders and stuck right next to me.

This fellow not only had a kind appearance, but his actions were also affable. I met him just this morning, but I already felt like I knew him for a long time.

Well, it was better to be friendly than to waste our energy competing against each other. It was a relief he didn't seem like that guy who would stress me out.

"Are you going to continue working?"

Gunyoung asked abruptly.

"Why?"

"Since we already started, I want to work for a long time. I think we work well together. When I worked part-time with Blackout, I didn't get along well with the managers so it was exhausting."

Even someone as sociable as him had people he didn't get along with.

I hesitated as I couldn't answer right away. My thoughts were complex. In fact, I was still dazed. However, the members seemed to have good personalities and it didn't seem bad to work with the sniper[2], Hyunjo and Gunyoung. Although, I'd have to get to know them more. These were my first impressions.

From what I heard from my working friends, all companies have

their psychos. Considering that, this environment didn't seem bad.

"I'll continue to work. But, I actually wanted to be assigned to an actor."

"An actor?"

"Yeah. I wasn't interested in being a manager for an idol group, nor did I know anything about them... If I get the chance to transfer to the actor team, I will."

"Ahh... That's too bad. Then let's get along until then."

"Sure."

"You might even end up enjoying the idol team more."

"Haha. I'm a man of principles, you know?"

"Let's quickly find a coffee shop, Jungjumma of principles."

"Hey! That's my nickname from middle school."

While we were chatting and laughing, we quickly found a coffee shop. Its crowded terrace indicated that it was a famous shop. Besides coffee, they had bread, cookies, sandwiches and other pastries that the girls might like, so we ordered a few of each.

While waiting for my order, I overheard two men whispering to each other.

“Did you hear about BYG? I heard they wanted another minute in their title track performance?”

“What the hell. Didn’t they already set up a special performance with another idol group from their company as a condition for doing their comeback stage with KpopCon first?

“Sugar Cats?”

“Yeah, them. But even that wasn’t enough and they asked for another minute?”

“That’s what I’m saying. That’s why they had to cut a new idol group. They didn’t have enough time.”

“Really?”

“The cut idol group. I heard that their manager spent a whole month sending the producer gifticons[3] and begging him to let them on the show.”

“Wow. These moralless bastards. Let’s see how well they live.”

“They’ll probably live fine.”

What was wrong with today. I really picked the day, didn’t I. On my first day of work, I think I thoroughly learned the laws of the entertainment jungle. I felt that there were all sorts of things going on behind an hour long program that only gets a 1-2% viewership rating.

I wondered what the group, that was filled with expectations, was doing now? If I was their manager… I’d probably had opened a few bottles of soju by now.

Holding a box full of coffee and bags of snacks, we entered a convenience store. Sausages, salads, puddings and fruits, we didn’t even look at the prices and just grabbed whatever we thought the girls would like. I wondered if this was what they meant by ‘sensibly’…

When we returned to the waiting room, the Neptune members were already awake. A few were swinging their hands and feet. Were they practicing their dance? Before they were nodding off like pairs of sick chickens, but now they were full of energy.

“We brought coffee and snacks!”

Songha was the first to come. She was the one that was holding a container of ice cream in the morning, it seemed like she really enjoyed eating.

“I smell something good. What snacks did you buy?”

“Bagels, sandwiches, we grabbed everything in the convenience store.”

They were happy. Happy. What was this proud feeling I felt? It felt like I was taming them with food.

Taehee and LJ were sifting through the snacks as they drank warm coffee. However, there were only three. While the three were eating ham and cheese sandwiches and bread stuffed with cream cheese, Seoyoung was only drinking coffee.

She only had a salad when the other girls were eating their lunches back at the salon, was she not hungry?

I brought out the snack I bought specifically for Seoyoung.

“This is low-fat yogurt and zero-calorie pudding; can you eat these?”

“Zero-calorie?”

Seoyoung showed some interest. Her face brightened after she examined the calorie count on the yogurt and pudding.

“This looks good. Is it new?”

“They said it was a new.”

“Looks tasty. Thanks, oppa.”

She devoured the yogurt in her hands. As he looked at her appearance, Gunyoung’s expression showed that he couldn’t understand.

“I don’t think you need to diet…”

“I’m the shortest out of the four and I have the largest bust.”

“Huh?”

Gunyoung stared at Seoyoung’s chest before he realized his actions and looked away. I was the same. As soon as the topic of Seoyoung’s bust came up, my eyes automatically looked down at her chest.

This was instinctive. Like a knee-jerk reflex.

Anyhow, Seoyoung’s words weren’t wrong. LJ had a similar size, but her arms and legs were long while her figure was fit. Seoyoung’s slim and short figure emphasized her chest.

But, what was wrong with that?

To the observer, it seemed to be part of her charm, but maybe it was different for the person herself?

“Because of my bust, if I gain even a bit weight, I look dense on TV. Also, my body is the type that gains weight by just drinking water, so I have to be on a diet.”

As she said that, she clenched her fists. It was like she wasn’t talking to Gunyoung, but encouraging herself.

LJ pressed the top of Seoyoung’s head and smirked.

“It’s true that you’re the shortest out of all of us, but you don’t have the biggest chest. Don’t try to subtly scam everyone.”

“Hey, you have to take into account that your genetics are different from mine!”

They were already fighting like cats and dogs. Though it did seem like Seoyoung was feeling a bit better because of LJ.

“Finish eating so we can go around and greet people. They should all be arriving soon.”

Hyunjo said while stretching his neck left and right. The members finished up their short snack time and got up. Even I got up while eating a sandwich. I was just starting to eat...

“Hello, we’re Neptune!”

‘Greetings’ were really just greetings.

The members went to each waiting room and bowed at a ninety-degree angle, greeting everyone. It was the sort of introductions celebrities would make on TV to their viewers.

If the singers in the waiting room were nosy and outgoing, they would share some polite words. However, it was usually the opposite. Usually, the singers would just tell them to cheer up, then the members would say thank you and that they would try their hardest. That was all.

Sometimes, as if they had implanted a steel rod in their neck, some bastards only nodded their heads slightly and there one rotten-mannered guy who would scan them once before ignoring them. I need to write down the name of that bastard.

Even though I could barely hold my anger, the Neptune members didn’t even flinch. Their strong mentality was really incredible.

It wasn’t like I was following behind the members either. How could I stay still when Hyunjo was going around, handing out business cards.

I understood why he stretched his neck before starting. He would greet the artists, greet the managers, greet the staff member and greet the reporters. I don’t know how many times I said, ‘Please

take care of our Neptune'. My neck was killing me.

However, greeting was fine. The awkwardness that came afterwards was the real problem. People had a hard time receiving my greetings. It seemed like Seoyoung's words were right, my suit made it seem like I was a superior.

When I told them I was a manager, only then would they start to laugh and greet me in a more relaxed state. Among those that laughed, there were some that held a bit of disdain.

There was one thing good about this situation... I could see celebrities as much as I wanted.

Men or women, they were all glimmering in full makeup. There were some who looked like they popped out of a manhwa. In the crowd of idols, there were a few times where I was distracted from seeing some famous solo artist.

In the past, I would sing that hyung's song a lot... I barely contained the urge to ask for an autograph.

Even though I thought that the entertainment world was cheap and dirty, whenever a group of girls with fluttering apron skirts passed by, I wondered if this was heaven... Wait, was that a school outfit under that apron?

Let's not stare.

“Hey.”

Gunyoung tapped my foot.

“What?”

He wordlessly gestured with his chin. When I looked over in that direction, I saw a sexy female artist wearing a swimming suit-like stage outfit.

This was heaven.

After going back and forth like a lost child, I leaned against the wall. Hyunjo was talking to someone over there and Gunyoung seemed to have gone to talk to someone or to the washroom as I couldn’t see him.

Since I had already made my rounds, I decided to rest for a bit. My poor waist. It was broken before I could use it properly.

Someone tapped my shoulders as I was massaging my neck and waist. I turned around thinking it was Gunyoung, but it was Taehee. I was surprised. At first, she looked really easy-going, but she looked completely different with makeup on. Maybe because she had this aura as the leader, but I never got the chance properly talk with her yet. Even though I said leader, she was five years younger than me, however, she still had that aura.

“What? Did something happen?”

“Do you see Seoyoung over there?”

Looking past Taehee’s shoulder, I saw Seoyoung surrounded by three girls in front of a waiting room.

“I see her.”

“Can you go and take Seoyoung away from there? I was going to ask Hyunjo oppa, but he was busy with another chief.”

Was this a bullying scene?

Surprised, I looked closely, but it didn’t seem like it. The girls were all smiling brightly and the atmosphere was very peaceful.

Then, what was the problem?

“They are a group called Sugar Cats and they were trainees together with Seoyoung.”

Sugar Cats? The ones who were going to do a special performance because they were a group from BYG Entertainment?

“They hold Seoyoung in disregard since they are gaining popularity while Seoyoung is stuck in the same place for two years. I hope you could act like nothing is wrong and just take her away from there.”

“If we go, it’ll damage her pride.”

Even LJ voiced her support.

“Okay. I’ll bring her.”

As I made my way there, I closely examined the situation again. Seoyoung and the three girls surrounding her were all laughing and seemed to be happy as they were meeting each other after a long period of time.

Were my eyes that of a fish? Why couldn’t I see it? Was it something that only girls knew.

“Umm.. Seoyoung?”

Seoyoung turned her head as I awkwardly called out to her.

Notes:

1] What this sentence means is that although there are no jobs that aren’t recognized in the world and since the entertainment world is so glamorous, we often don’t think of the number of people working behind the scenes

2] This is used to describe how Hyunjo comes out at specific times to insert his opinion on a certain manner

3] Gifticons – Think of them sort of like gift cards? Gift coupons? But online

Chapter 7: What It Means To Be A Music Program (3)

“Someone wants your autograph, you free?”

“An autograph?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, of course, I will. Guys, I have to go!”

Seoyoung immediately waved her hand. I bowed my head, but the girls bowed more politely than me. No matter how I looked at it, in my eyes, they looked like really nice and bright girls.

However, when I saw that Seoyoung was relieved, I felt that there really was something going on.

So my eyes were definitely fish eyes.

“Where is he? Who do I need to give my autograph to?”

A voice filled with expectations. My conscience hurt a little. I should have used a different excuse.

I looked around the crowded area and embarrassingly said,

“…Where did he go?”

“What the hell.”

“He was here just a while ago. It was a guy.”

“What? I wanted to give him my autograph! This oppa is bad! My precious fan!”

Seoyoung smiled as her eyes formed half-moons.

“Unni! Taehee unni! Someone wanted my autograph.”

“Really?”

“But, do you know what the most important part is?”

“What?”

“This oppa lost him!”

“That’s too bad.”

Taehee patted Seoyoung’s head and smiled. And briefly at me.

She was much younger than me, but why do I feel like I need to

call her hyung?

“Who wanted your autograph? Did this oppa see a studio ghost?”

LJ teased her and the two started fighting again.

Hyunjo told us to go back without him, so Gunyoung and I took the girls back to the waiting room. I was about to lay my tired body down on the sofa when I heard a knock.

“Yes?”

“Hello, seniors! We’re pretty, pretty Pretty Girls.”

Eight girls with long straight hair entered the room. They were the ones who were wearing a schoolgirl outfit under an apron.

Their manager who entered with them, looked at Gunyoung and me, before deciding to approach me.

“Hello. They are a newly debuted group. Their average age is eighteen, so they still don’t know a lot. I look forward to working with you in the future.”

You probably aren’t looking forward to working with me.

And what were they thinking dressing eighteen-year-old girls like

that? These shameless adults.

“Yes, hello.”

“Please accept this.”

I was curious what he was handing out, it turned out to be a mini album. There were even autographs on the cover. Afterwards, Pretty Girls merrily chatted with the girls before leaving.

“I thought it was only tough greeting people, but getting greeted isn’t easy either.”

Seoyoung shook her head at my words.

“Receiving greetings is much harder.”

“Really? Why?”

“We’ve gained seniority after we debuted, but we have nothing to show for it. How uneasy do think we feel when these girls that are younger than us come up and greet us?”

“Ah…”

“What if they get more popular before we do? We don’t know how much longer our company will continue to promote us since

they wouldn't keep trying to fill a bottomless pot. We have these thoughts."

I only opened and closed my mouth a few times. I didn't know how to reply to that. Seoyoung shrugged her shoulders and smiled looking at my expression.

"Just what am I telling this new oppa."

The atmosphere quickly brightened. The members were noisily chatting with each other while practicing their choreography. I just silently watched.

I was honestly surprised.

Unknown for two years. An unpopular group.

However, I didn't feel that it was a serious issue. Those girls were only unlucky. Since they are young, pretty and have good personalities, they will be successful in other things. Those were my initial thoughts.

They are just products of an idol girl group factory, maybe I felt that way because of this bias. However, now I felt bad for having those thoughts.

The worries of a twenty-one-year-old girl were definitely no lighter than mine.

If I had the ability, I wanted to help them get a chance.

These were my thoughts.

A day in the waiting room was really just that. Wait after a rehearsal, wait while they recorded interviews with groups that had a comeback stage today. Wait until it was time for the live broadcast.

I wondered how people survived this without smart phones.

Neptune was the third group to go up. As the time for the broadcast approached, the members were busy. They changed into their stage outfits their stylists brought for them, fixed their hair and makeup. When they had some free time, they would practice their choreography.

“I’m going to go to the washroom.”

Why was it that I felt more nervous than them?

I dragged my stiff legs out of the waiting room. The hallway was still packed. I was barely able to pass through to the washroom when a man forcefully made his way out.

“Ah, fuck! This is driving me crazy!”

His face was red and it seemed like he was extremely angry, as he came out swearing endlessly.

Let's avoid him.

I was about to go around him when I noticed what was on his chest. Employee Go Joontae. It was an employee card. I remembered Hyunjo's words about greeting everyone who had an employee card. But, that's a crazy bastard. Wondering if I should greet him or not, I was just like 'it's not like I was going to die' and stepped in front of the man.

"Hello, I am Jung Sunwoo from W&U. I am currently working with a girl group called Neptune. Please take care of us."

I was smiling diligently. He probably won't swear at a smiling person.

Fortunately, the employee calmed down a little after looking at me. Was this a benefit of wearing a suit?

"W&U entertainment? You guys have girl groups? First time hearing about this, are they new?"

"They debuted two years ago. There are 4 members."

"Is that so. What did you say the group name was?"

“It is Neptune.”

“Do you have a business card…”

I didn’t have a business card yet. Do I have to give him my phone number?

“I don’t have a business card…”

“Mr. Producer.”

Someone hurriedly ran towards us. It was a young man with a big body of an athlete. He blocked the front of the employee and bowed his head, almost reaching his knees.

“Sorry. I am really sorry. Sorry. I don’t have any other words to say!”

“Ah, it’s fine.”

“Really, I should have kept an eye on the girls better…”

Was he a manager?

“It’s fine. Don’t raise my blood pressure and leave. I’m busy trying to clean up the pile of shit your company took!”

“Mr. Producer, Mr. Producer!”

“Haaa….!”

“Then, our broadcast…”

“What do you mean broadcast! A twenty-something-year-old girl group member got a DUI with her boyfriend, how can I let her on the broadcast! There will be articles all over the internet tomorrow! Sigh, talk about ungrateful. You guys just sprayed poo water all over a set meal. I need to start filming this week if I want to have the broadcast out in time, it’s driving me crazy…!”

“I-if we went with noise marketing, it might even be bene…”

“This is a crime! Do I have to get bashed on before I even start?!”

Eventually, the producer left while swearing. The man left behind kicked the washroom door.

“Damn bitch! Dirty bitch, does she know how hard it was to get this chance!”

What lovely words. It was because of people like him that managers are stereotyped as gangsters. If I was to make a comparison, Hyunjo was an angel.

“What are you looking at?! Think it’s a show or something?!”

The man glared at me. What a surprise.

“You are blocking the path.”

“Fuck…”

I thought that he would vent on me, but he quickly left in a different direction.

“What kind of person is that.”

At that moment, my vision darkened.

Was I dreaming again?

I was once again in my forties. Chairman of a management company. A successful me who used a huge freaking office and wore a high-quality suit. It was the same dream I had in the morning. Director Park and Reporter Song were smiling in front of me.

It was definitely a dream… but, that wasn’t possible.

Just a second ago, I was in front of the washroom.

If not a dream, what was this?

What was it really.

“You met Chairman Go Joontae on your first day?”

The name flowing out of Reporter Song’s lips seemed familiar. Chairman Go Joontae. The man I met just now. It was the name on the man’s employee card. Although, he wasn’t a chairman.

“At that time, Knet was about to launch Next K-Star. It was a competition program with eight new idol groups. Since it was a long time ago, Reporter Song might be too young to know.”

Next K-Star?

“I know it too. Wasn’t it the first season such a big hit that it ended up going on for several more seasons?”

“That’s right. It was a few days before the first filming... One of the appearing girl groups got in trouble. So, Producer Joontae was in a situation where he had to find a new girl group to replace them. I met him at that time.”

“My god. You really have great luck. So did you get a spot on that big program on your first day? Neptune appeared on that program.”

Wait, what? Neptune appeared on that program?

Although the situation was confusing, I strained my ear to closely listen to the conversation. It felt the right thing to do.

“Hahaha. Reporter Song, if things went that well, why would I say that the path of hardship opened on my first day?”

“Then what happened?”

“At that time, I didn’t know much about Entertainment Producers. Obviously, I didn’t know who Go Joontae was and that he was leading such a huge program. So that’s why I asked a friend I worked with. ‘I met a producer named Go Joontae and it seemed like one of the girl groups appearing on his program has to be replaced. Since they are looking for a different group, maybe we should introduce Neptune to him,’ is what I said.”

“Ah…”

“That friend told me that it probably wasn’t possible. The program he’s producing only had new idol groups, so they wouldn’t accept Neptune, who debuted two years ago. Also, if we were going in as a replacement, the company wouldn’t allow it in the first place.”

“Don’t tell me you believed him?”

Yeah. You didn’t, right?

But, why did I feel like I believed him.

“I believed him.”

That’s right. Bad premonitions were never wrong.

“So while I believed him, that friend found Producer Joontae and pushed Neptune. ‘Neptune members are like this, their schedule is free, we can join at any time.’ And that was successful. That friend was nicknamed Lucky Charm[1] for bringing such a big program on his first day and when I confessed it was unfair, I was branded as the foolish guy who couldn’t even take care of himself. It was then when I first realized life was a battle.”

“Oh no…”

“Haha. I told you my first day was dynamic.”

“By any chance, do I know that friend?”

“This will be off-the-record, right?”

“Of course.”

“Choi Gunyoung. It was Choi Gunyoung.”

“Oh my, that person…”

“That’s right.”

“So he was like that even then.”

“Jung Sunwoo!”

I saw Gunyoung in front of my eyes. And I was standing in front of the washroom.

“What are you doing, standing here? It’s almost time. The chief says to come quickly.”

“...Damn, goosebumps.”

I unconsciously stepped back.

“What? Why do you have goosebumps?”

“Uh....”

Let’s just say I saw a different side of you. It wasn’t like that happened in real life, but it felt like it would happen for sure.

“Do you happen to know a producer named Go Joontae?”

“Yeah. Next K-Star. It’s hot right now. Why? Did you see him”

It felt like my hair stood straight up. It was so hair-raising, my hands and feet were all tingly. Maybe this was how people felt when they are struck by lightning during a rainy day.

Just what was happening to me?

“Why are you like this?”

“Something really important just came up.”

“What?”

“Tell the chief I am going to solve this first before I go. Tell him I’m sorry.”

“What?! What happened, the girls are going to go up on the stage in a bit!”

My head was messy, but it was clear what I had to do.

I ran in the direction Producer Go Joontae left towards.

Notes:

1] Lucky Charm means Lucky Charm

Chapter 8: Not A Dream, See The Future (1)

I tried to call Hyunjo multiple times, but it seemed like he was in a loud place as his phone kept going to voicemail.

Fortunately, Producer Joontae wasn't far. I hesitated in front of him for a bit.

Was it okay to ask him before I told Hyunjo? What do I do?

Damn it! It was obvious what I should do. I don't know if it was the future or whatever, but in there they said Gunyoung reckless ran to the producer and pushed Neptune. As a result, Neptune was able to appear on the program, while Gunyoung became the company's Lucky Charm[1].

I couldn't become a retard who couldn't even take care of himself. Let's at least give it a try.

"Mr. Producer!"

"What now..! Ah, you're from before..."

"I am Neptune's manager, Jung Sunwoo."

Producer Joontae's face slowly calmed down.

“I felt like I didn’t properly introduce our members.”

“You said they debuted 2 years ago? I know that Blackout is in W&U, but I never knew they had girl groups. They only managed actors before.”

If I knew this would happen, I would have carried around my bag. It had their profiles inside.

Although it was somewhat lacking, I showed the producer the album on my phone. It was a relief I saved a few pictures of the members when I was browsing through the internet.

“Hmmm… There’s a lounge over there. Let’s move there.”

After flipping through some pictures, Producer Joontae led me to a small lounge next to the elevator. I pressed my stiff shoulders as I followed along. I don’t know if it was because I was nervous, but my body felt stiff all over.

I sat down and studied Producer Joontae’s expression and eyes. He was looking through each picture seriously.

Yeah, that’s it, keep looking. Look closer. The more you look, the prettier they’ll be.

“They are a group W&U put their heart and soul into. As they were carefully chosen from large companies, they are all skilled, great talkers, have good characters and are very motivated.”

I felt more pressured than all the speeches, presentations, interviews I had done until now. There was never a time when my mind was in such a mess.

I tried to make motions and talk with confidence. I didn't want to look too desperate, so I took notice of that. I also racked my brain to say one more word.

The leader, Taehee, is an amazing singer with skills in writing songs. LJ gave off the impression 'I'm the baddest bitch', but, in reality, she lives to tease her members, especially Seoyoung. Seoyoung was naturally good at entertainment shows, so she has some experience on appearing on entertainment programs and Songha was an irrefutable beauty.

I didn't even remember what I said during the conversation. I just didn't stop talking.

The profiles I saw in the van, the internet articles I browsed through in the salon and waiting room, I used whatever I could to speak positively about Neptune.

"Neptune. Neptune, you say... Not bad. Their visuals are actually better than Lemon Girls."

Fortunately, the producer's reaction wasn't bad. I gulped down my saliva as I wait for his decision.

“Why weren’t they on the list? Was it because the group would soon be 3 years old? If we were to recruit them into the program, would we be able to have some actors from W&U make brief appearances on the show?”

“Pardon?”

“There a lot of expensive actors from W&U that don’t make appearances on entertainment shows. I’m not asking for much, just enough to use gain some attention… How about it?”

“That is something I cannot decide by myself. I will confirm it with the chief and let you know immediately.”

“Chief?”

“I am a new recruit.”

I forgot to tell him it was my first day.

It was good that I forgot. As soon as he heard those words, Producer Joontae absent-mindedly laughed. He looked as though he had nothing more to say to a rookie manager.

“Is that so? I thought… So are you here for the music broadcast?”

“Yes.”

“Then you probably came with the girls. Is the chief with you as well?”

“He should be watching their live broadcast.”

“Then can we meet after the performance? With all the members. Let’s talk once we’ve seen the members. Here’s my business card, call me later.”

“I will.”

As I accepted the business card with both hands, something poked my back.

“What are you doing here?”

I turned around to see Seoyoung panting.

“Hyunjo oppa is talking about whether to kill you or not. ‘It hasn’t been a day, but he already disappeared during a live broadcast. Where the hell did this bastard come from?’”

“What are you doing here? What about the performance?”

“We’re done already. I came here since the washroom in front of the waiting room was packed. But, I’m not the one with the problem, it’s you, oppa! You have to work to feed the quadruplets, what are you going to do if you get fired on your first day. You lost

my fan and even disappeared, you're getting pretty close."

"Wait, why do I have to feed the quadruplets?"

"Whatever, I'll cover for you so hurry up and think of an excuse!"

Why is she like this? Was it because she just came down from her performance? She seemed really excited. Like a person who already had a bottle of alcohol.

Seoyoung suddenly blinked.

"But, who is the person behind you?"

Gasp! There were more important things at hand!

As I quickly turned around, Producer Joontae was looking at Seoyoung with laser-like eyes. After looking at Joontae, as if she understood, she said,

"Ah! Were you looking for my fan you lost earlier? You're kidding me!"

"No, this person..."

"Hello! I am Im Seoyoung from Neptune! Would like an autograph now?"

“He’s a producer.”

“Gyahh!”

Seoyoung let out a scream and energetically shoved her head down.

I thought she was doing a deep bow.

“What do I do! I am sorry, Mr. Producer!”

“Hahaha. Your character is fresh and cute. Nice to meet you.”

Seoyoung had an expression that she made a big mistake and was stamping her feet. Any man who had protective instincts would not be able to stay mad at this sight.

Even Producer Joontae calmed down and revealed a much more relaxed expression, as he massaged his shoulders. And he made a gesture telling me to call him with his other hand.

“Then, talk with your superior and call me.”

“Right away, I will give you a call in 10 minutes.”

I grabbed the confused Seoyoung and ran. Pushing my way

between the flood of people in the hallway, I ran as if I was in a race. Seoyoung, who was following behind me, kept asking me why we were running, but I didn't have the time to reply.

Shortly, we arrived at the waiting room. It seemed like the other members were inside as they couldn't be seen, however, Hyunjo and Gunyoung were guarding the door.

Hyunjo was the first to see me.

"Seoyoung, go inside."

"Oppa."

"Quickly. They're all changing inside, so you go and get changed."

Seoyoung looked at me with a worried expression, but I pushed her back, indicating she should go. The talk with Producer Joontae went well, there was no way he would kill me, right?

"What did the bastard who went to the washroom do all this time to come crawling back after the performance?"

What do I do. I think he's going to kill me.

As soon as Seoyoung went inside, the veins on Hyunjo's neck bulged.

“Something important? So, let’s hear what this so-called important something is, shall we?”

“That is…”

“Was it more important than the girls’ performance? You asshole, don’t you know that this is a live broadcast? When you are later assigned to them by yourself, are you going to leave them and walk around? What are you going to do if there is an accident? Do you think I can trust you with the girls like this?”

“I am sorry. I met Producer Go Joontae while I was going to the washroom.”

The uncontrollably angry voice cut off.

“What? Who?”

“The producer of Next K-Star, Producer Go Joontae. He was looking for a new group to replace a group as one of their members got in a lot of trouble. I was going to tell chief about it, but the signal wouldn’t connect…”

“Since they were about to begin, I put it on airplane… No, so what happened?”

“First, I caught up to Producer Joontae and showed him pictures

of Neptune while I introduced them.”

“G-good job. So?”

“He asked if he could talk directly with the chief and the girls. I received his business card.”

I handed out the business card in my hand. Hyunjo looked back and forth at the business card and my face. The constantly tired and haggard face he had since the morning was dazed.

“He can see them. Of course, he can see them.”

Hyunjo, who was motionless like a lagging computer, suddenly hit my forearm.

“Mr. Sunwoo, first call the producer and ask him where he is and meet up with him. Block him before he meets up with other groups’ managers. While you do that, I will call the team leader and the director and relay the situation to them. And Mr. Gunyoung, since the girls are going to meet with the producer, tell the girls to come out after they are done wearing their outfits again and fixing their makeup. What are you doing, the both of you! Run!”

“Yes, yes!”

To meet up with Producer Joontae again, I ran until my feet were sweaty.

Afterwards, the situation left my hands.

The situation was swept up like a river as everything progressed in a hurry. While I clung to Producer Joontae, Hyunjo, who finished talking with the company, and Gunyoung brought Neptune. Although they were still somewhat dazed, they politely bowed at a ninety-degree angle to greet the producer.

The members had a long conversation with the producer. Although they had to go up when they announced 1st place, they still came back down to continue. Luckily, the mood seemed good and it looked like the producer liked the girls.

“Don’t say anything to the girls just yet.”

After sending the members back to the waiting room, Hyunjo grabbed Gunyoung and me and told us.

“If you unnecessarily raise their expectations, they won’t be able to sleep at night. Until it becomes certain, keep your mouths shut.”

Afterwards, Hyunjo passionately expressed the good points of Neptune. He was so good, even I felt like I was getting bewitched. From what I saw, it looked like Producer Joontae was also partly bewitched as well.

“I have to discuss it with the writers, but I like them. Their visuals are good, they look like they have good personalities,

however even the girl who got a DUI also had a good outwardly appearance. Kids these days…”

“Mr. Producer. We are W&U. Have you seen any of our actors cause any problems with their personal lives?”

“Well, W&U are famous for being good at their job.”

As the conversation started to mix in some jokes, the mood was more relaxed.

“Then, Mr. Producer, how…”

“No matter how much I am in a rush; I can’t make a decision right away. We have to have an internal meeting. We have to get an ‘okay’ from the department head and director. It won’t take long. Once the DUI article goes up, we will receive a rain of inquiry calls from reporters, so we don’t have much time. We have to find a solution before the program receives a bad image from this incident.”

“Is the program’s chief producer Department Head Choi Sungho?“

“Right, Sungho hyung.”

“Since it’s been a while, our chairman asked if Department Head Choi would like to talk face-to-face tonight if he’s free…”

“Really? Do they know each other personally?”

“He said that they met a few times in the past.”

“Then, just a minute. If this proceeds quickly, it’ll be great for us as well.”

Producer Joontae, who was talking with the chief producer, gave us an ‘okay’ sign.

While they were talking, the meeting was set up very swiftly. From W&U, the chairman, the management business director and management team 3 leader and from Knet, the chief producer, who was directing the project, and the main producer, Go Joontae, will attend this meeting.

Notes:

1] Lucky Charm means Lucky Charm. You’ll see why I used Lucky Charm instead of Lucky Charm in later chapters

Chapter 9: Not A Dream, See The Future (2)

After dropping off Neptune members at their residence, we returned to Sangamdong. The meeting place was a hurriedly reserved high-class sushi restaurant. Although we didn't know if we were going to attend, Hyunjo dragged us there saying it was a good idea to show our faces to the chairman.

I simply breathed while following behind Hyunjo.

Honestly, I wasn't in my right mind since a while ago.

Hahaha. How could I be in my right mind? Considering the waves crashing down on my life today, it was good enough that I didn't suffer a heart attack.

I was relieved thinking my mind wasn't as weak as I thought.

"I think they've arrived?"

The first to arrive were from W&U. The management business director was a middle-aged man whose head was starting to bald while the management team 3 leader was a man in his mid-thirties with a pleasant impression.

And lastly, the man who got out of the Rolls Royce was the chairman, the man who I had only seen in pictures in interviews. He was the role model for me who was dreaming of becoming the chairman of a management company.

Baek Hansung.

My mind sobered up as soon as I saw him.

He looked 10 years younger than his real age of forty-seven and his body revealed that he exercised regularly. He was wearing a high-quality suit under a cashmere coat, but his appearance... He looked like he could be the cover model for a men's magazine.

Above all, his actions were filled with confidence and dignity. Of course, he was someone who could be dignified. He had built a huge management company like W&U starting from a 1-man agency. The skilled of the skilled. The business man of business men.

While greeting them, I made eye contact with Chairman Baek Hansung. Very briefly.

"You guys did well."

He turned after lightly patting Gunyoung and my shoulders.

"Then, let's go. The people from Knet haven't arrived yet, right?"

"Yes. Should we come with you?"

As soon as Hyunjo asked, Chairman Baek Hansung shook his head.

“Nah. Leave the business to us and you guys wait for the good news.”

Then Chairman Baek Hansung led the director and team 3 leader into the sushi restaurant.

It has already been 4 hours since we have been waiting for the good news. It was 1 a.m. right now.

“What kind of sushi are they eating for hours?”

Nervousness was present in Gunyoung’s voice.

We were waiting after ordering chicken in a 24-hour bar. Just in case we would have to meet with the chairman or the director, we couldn’t even take a sip of alcohol.

Hyunjo answered while piercing a piece of cold chicken.

“Do you think they were eating sushi all this time? They probably moved to the next place.”

“How do think things are going? I’m so curious I could die.”

“It’s good that they are taking their time. If the talk wasn’t going well, they would have already ended.”

The two of them were checking the time while shaking their legs. The only one who was quiet at the table was me. I was in thought. Continuously for 4 hours, continuously thinking.

What exactly did I see?

When I first saw it in the morning, I thought it was just a dream, but there was no way that was true. I definitely saw it when I was awake with my eyes open while standing and I woke up in the same state. If it was narcolepsy, then I would have already had my skull split open on the washroom tiles. So it definitely wasn’t a dream.

Then what was it?

Supernatural ability? Was it something like foresight?

I recalled the movies and dramas that had supernatural beings or superheroes. There were a variety of methods of which they would be able to look into the future, from knowing what would happen a minute from the present to drawing the future.

Did I just get a supernatural ability like that?

Didn’t those that contracted supernatural powers get them from getting bitten by radioactive insects, a vampire or experience some

other special circumstances?

But, what about me?

I didn't have anything happen to me. What was this?!

Hoooo. Let's not get excited. Let's calmly think about it one more time.

I didn't know why I was given this ability. I didn't know how to use my ability. However, if you thought about it, it was something to get excited over. Anyone would have the same thoughts.

Supernatural ability, it was a supernatural ability!

Of course, if I was to receive a supernatural ability, I would have preferred teleportation or invisibility, but foresight was good as well. It was cool, even mysterious. If this was a movie, it was an ability that would be of great importance!

Ehahahahaha! I am a supernatural being! Yay!

Now, was it time for aliens to appear? Was it?!

...Damn! I couldn't calm down!

"Mr. Sunwoo."

“Yes?!”

I abruptly lifted my head and saw Hyunjo looking at me. My excitement slowly died down.

“Are you tired?”

“No. I was just thinking... I’m feeling a bit out of it after experiencing everything today.”

It seemed like he thought I was nodding off since my head was lowered. I tried to show I wasn’t sleeping by opening my eyes really wide.

“Now that I think about it, today was your first day. I forgot because of what happened today.”

Hyunjo pushed aside the cold chicken and handed us a menu.

“You two can choose whatever you want to eat. Instead of looking like you’re being punished, should we relax and have a beer? Let’s consider it a welcoming party.”

We ordered barbecue chicken dripping with oil along with freshwater snails, fries and fish cake soup to warm our bellies. The owner who would show a dissatisfied expression whenever he passed us gave us a friendly smile as he got us our beers.

My heart felt refreshed after drinking the bubbly beer. After I downed a pint in an instant, Hyunjo pressed the bell again.

“Well, it doesn’t seem like they are going to call for us so drink more. You can drink a lot today.”

“Yes?”

“I meant you did a good job. When I first saw a pale guy wearing a suit, I thought where did this guy come from… But, even without telling you to, you went and introduced the girls to a producer and got them a chance. Do all people with quadruplet nieces and nephews act that way?”

The sincere compliment made me feel many times better than the beer.

“My luck was good. The producer and the manager of Lemon Girls were talking about the group dropping out.”

“Of course, the timing and luck were unbelievably good, but if it wasn’t for you grabbing onto that chance and not letting go, we would have lost it. I heard you were very passionate?”

I bashfully scratched my cheek. It was hard to control my expression. Compliments from work were very different from the ones from family and school. I felt proud as it felt like my existence as an employee was acknowledged.

If I didn’t see the future, I probably would have lost this chance.

I didn’t even know who Producer Go Joontae was or that Knet was launching a program called Next K-Star. Even if I did, I could have hesitated whether or not I should talk with the producer and eventually turn my back on it.

If that was the case, things would have proceeded the way my future self said, the Lucky Charm of the company would have been Gunyoung.

I looked over at Gunyoung while drinking beer. It would have been normal if he was unhappy that I was the only one who got complimented on our first day, but he was actually assisting Hyunjo.

If I didn’t see the future and told Gunyoung about Producer Joontae, would he really have tricked me?

I remembered what Reporter Song had said.

‘So that person was like that even then.’

The good person, Choi Gunyoung. The person who I thought I would work well with, Choi Gunyoung. I wondered what kind of person he really was...

One thing that was certain was he was someone I had to put my guard up against.

However, I couldn't openly push him away. We were in a situation where, unless one was assigned to a different team, we would have to work together.

I would only become the bad guy if I pushed him away for no apparent reason and if I was to tell Gunyoung, 'I think you will backstab me, so I don't think I can be friendly with you,' I would become the crazy person... Sigh.

I never had to face a more complicated problem in my life. To have to work with the guy who backstabbed, no, who might backstab me... Was this 'Sleeping with the enemy'?

On top of that, although I knew that the truth, I might end up unconsciously dropping my guard since he really did look like a good guy.

I have to be careful. If I were to get backstabbed even while knowing this fact, I would be a loser, a loser.

To reinforce my guard against him, I decided to call Gunyoung traitor from now on.

"Mr. Gunyoung did well today as well. Quick witted and sociable, anyone would think you've worked here for a few years. It was because of Mr. Gunyoung, the music broadcast was able to go so

smoothly.”

“Thank you, chief.”

“Let’s have another round. Don’t tell me you guys are drunk after 2 pints?”

Two became three, then three became four. We drank unceasingly.

“Mr. Sunwoo, what time is it right now?”

“4:30. But chief, please speak casually.”

“I told you I am more comfortable this way.”

When you were mad, you seemed really comfortable talking casually.

Well, it was a really long day today. I didn’t imagine my first day to be like this. How was it I was unable to leave even at 4:30 when I started at 3 a.m. yesterday?

Was there anyone in the world who experienced their first day like me? Besides the traitor.

There was still no news from the chairman. Just what in the

world were these people doing? 3rd, no, they probably moved to the 4th place by now.

Although it was certain Neptune would appear on the show as I didn't know the process of when and how they joined, it was really frustrating. No matter how quick things proceeded, it wasn't like things would be decided just like that, maybe it would take 2-3 days?

Once we ordered pints of beer, it just ended up being eating and drinking event. We kept ordering more beers and extra sides.

Then 5 in the morning. The moment we had been waiting for had come, the phone began to ring.

Chapter 10: Not A Dream, See The Future (3)

“Hello?”

Hyunjo hurriedly answered the call. Even I strained my ears to listen to the small voice.

-Uh… Hoooo, is this Hyunjo?

It was the management team 3 leader.

“Hyung! What did you do all this time? I thought you guys drank too much and were knocked out on the streets!”

-Hey, hey, it just ended. I think I’m going to die. These not-so-young-anymore men drank like they were trying to fill a bottomless pit. Their liver is better than mine.

“So? What happened in the meeting?”

I heard someone gulp their saliva. Was it me?

-We decided to do it.

“…Really?!”

-Tomorrow… Oh, it’s today. Articles will be released soon.

I clenched a fist on top of my knee. If I didn't, I might have yelled.

I wonder how the conversation went for them to agree so easily?

-The chairman pushed for it really hard. And we were lucky. There was a group that the staff dropped in the end, but they just got an overseas schedule. Their director came over and made a mess and everything. If the timing was even a bit off, we wouldn't have been able to get it. Who was that guy, the Lucky Charm who got this? That guy really did something big.

"So it's really been decided?"

-We haven't officially signed yet, but it's already decided.

"Hahaha! The girls would love to hear this."

-Yeah, they must have had a hard time up until now so quickly tell them the good news. We got the chance, how popular they become all depend on you guys.

"I know."

-Do a good job.

Hyunjo talked with the management team 3 leader for a long

time afterwards before hanging up. Then he used his phone for a bit before handing it to me.

“Here. Take it.”

“Pardon?”

As I accepted the phone without thinking, I saw that it was dialing Lee Taehee.

Why did he give this to me?

“Mr. Sunwoo was the one to grab this chance, so you be the one to tell them. Before they release the articles.”

The ringing stopped and a sleepy voice answered.

-Did something happen? We don’t have anything scheduled today.

It was Taehee.

“Cough, I’m Jung Sunwoo. I have something to say.”

As I raised my head, I saw Hyunjo and the traitor looking at me expectedly. Hyunjo motioned to quickly tell them.

“Do you happen to know the new program that’s about to start on Knet?”

-Yes. I’ve heard of it.

“Neptune’s going to appear on that.”

-...Sorry?

“The program on Knet...”

-No, I did hear it properly... is it true? I heard that they had already cast everyone and had finished their photo shoots for the poster...

“It’s true. One of the girl groups had to leave, so Neptune was chosen to replace them. The chief wanted me to tell you guys before they released the articles...”

It was very noisy at the other end of the phone. It seemed like Taehee woke everyone up to tell them the news. I could hear the ‘Kyah’ ‘Kyah’ screams. It was Seoyoung.

“Give it here for a second.”

Hyunjo grabbed the phone and pressed the record button.

The loud noises of girls chatting. Close to tears, cries of excitement. Various sounds were recorded. It wasn't even a video call, yet I could imagine what was going on.

"Why did you record...?"

"There might a use for it later."

To even think of the future at a moment like this, I had to learn this as well.

Seoyoung, who was close to crying, kept asking if it was real and after constantly confirming that it was, I passed the phone to Hyunjo. He gave them a few words of caution before hanging up.

"Mr. Sunwoo, how do you feel?"

How do I feel?

How should I explain it? When the girls were so happy they were about to cry, at that moment, I felt...

"I feel proud... And satisfied."

"It's like that when you are taking care of new groups. The feeling of their increasing number of regular programs. The rise in people who recognize them and their fans. The pleasure you feel knowing that you built this up. If you get addicted to it, you will

never be able to stop.”

“Ah...”

“Should we all get up now? We have to rest to work.”

We grabbed all our things and got up.

While Hyunjo was paying the bill, we were waiting outside. I didn’t know if it was the alcohol, but the wind didn’t seem that cold. Ring, I heard the sound of bells ringing and Hyunjo opened the door.

Suddenly, my vision went dark.

Again.

I was in my future office again. As soon as I realized this fact, I concentrated my eyes and ears. The things I see and hear here could change my life. I can’t even ignore the smallest detail.

“You started with Next K-Star and now, 20 years later, you became the chairman of a company with a worldwide network.”

“Haha. I still have more to do.”

“Your first experience was with Neptune and Next K-Star; did

they influence your actions?”

Reporter Song asked. My future self pondered for a bit. For a while, I only saw the body below my neck.

“Yes. Because I got addicted then.”

“Addicted…?”

“The pleasure of watching someone grow. That time, even though I only dug my own grave and didn’t contribute much, I still felt that way. Neptune was unknown, but through their appearance on Next K-Star, their popularity rose quickly. Although they did receive a lot of insults…”

What?

“When I look at it now, it seemed like just a passing rain shower.”

I hoped he would talk more specifically on why Neptune received insults, but the topic quickly changed. Damn.

“And their next album did really well and they even received first place on a music program. I received a lot of pleasure watching their progress from the sidelines. If I didn’t experience that then, I probably wouldn’t have been the person I am today.”

Good. Neptune's next album will be a hit. Although it gets me that they received insults, it seemed the end result was good.

"I used to listen to the song a lot."

The quietly listening Director Park added in.

"It was Neptune's first hit song and it is still the first song you think of when you remember Neptune."

"It seems to have been a good song?"

"You haven't listened to it before? Ah... Right, it's an old song for Reporter Song. The song was really good. It really matched well with Neptune as well. I miss it."

"Then should we listen to the song while we continue? It's been a while for me too."

As my future self spoke, I suddenly heard a clear, vivid song.

"Mr. Sunwoo, are you drunk?"

I abruptly awoke from the music.

"Why are you staring so intently at the floor? Do you feel like you're going to throw up?"

Hyunjo patted my back.

“You seem weak to alcohol.”

“No, I’m not drunk. I was just thinking of something…”

I quickly showed him my clear eyes.

“That’s a relief. From now on, you’ll be drinking more often.”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

“Well, both of you did well today.”

“Chief, thank you for your hard work.”

“Have a safe trip.”

The traitor and I grabbed a taxi. Hyunjo said while getting in the taxi first.

“Since it’s 5 right now, go home and rest well. Eat something good in the morning and be at work by 8.”

Did I hear it wrong?

“By what time?”

“By 8. If we want to write a press release in time, we need to have a meeting with the PR team.”

“Ah…”

“Since we got a regular program, we will much busier starting tomorrow. But once you get used to the work, you guys can work together and help each other out, so don’t get too scared. Hahaha.”

A devil. There’s a devil here.

“Then see you tomorrow. Don’t disappear on me.”

Hyunjo left with a smiling face. The traitor and I looked at each other silently. If it wasn’t for the fact that he was a backstabber who was completely different inside from his outward appearance, I might have felt a much deeper comradery.

“Go home safely.”

“You too. See you tomorrow.”

I took an empty taxi after we went our separate ways. I didn’t know if the taxi had a drunk client before me, but the car smelled of vomit. I rolled down the windows, but it suddenly started to

rain.

The taxi quickly arrived at my one-room apartment. I paid the driver and received a receipt. Just in case I could file it under company expenses.

As the rain dripped down on me, I made my way up to my cramped room. It was somehow already past 6 a.m. I had to get to work by 8. I guess I can sleep for 30 minutes...

However, after washing then lying on my bed, I couldn't sleep. My exhausted body was stretched out on my bed, but my mind was as awake as ever.

Eventually, I got up and turned on my laptop. I paused briefly on the search engine. What should I search... Yeah.

[I got a supernatural ability.]

Movies, dramas and anything related to supernatural abilities appeared on the screen until I found one that was like what I was looking for. A question asked by a person claiming he had a supernatural ability. I read, half in doubt, but found that he was in a similar situation to me.

It was a concern on whether he should continue to hide his power he received one day in a dream or use it to help others.

Was this really real?

I examined the page with expectation, but found that it was under the humor category of the forums. Damn. All the comments were of ridicule and mockery and some even suggested a hospital.

[Power of foresight] [Real Supernatural Being]

I gave up after searching a few more times. I felt like I would get a mental disorder.

I rolled around my cramped one-room. There was only me. No one would know if I did something weird, right?

Now then…

What do I have to do to use this power at will?

There was no user's manual and there was no one I could ask. If I asked, I would probably be recommended to a mental hospital as well. Finding out for myself was the only way.

First, I concentrated as I closed my eyes. I tried my best to recall the future I saw. Although I was frowning weirdly and concentrating to a point I was about make a weird noise, there was not even the slightest change.

I quit after trying for a countless number of times. This meant one of two things.

Either I was unable to figure out the method to use my power or the power was not something I could use whenever I wanted to and randomly occurred.

If I found a method to control my power, I was going to check what the next lottery numbers were...

I opened up a notepad and recorded all the information I heard and saw.

The distant future me was the chairman of a management company. One that was quite successful. It seemed like I was acquainted with Director Park who came for the interview. From Reporter Song's words, I seemed to have obtained my position as the chairman of a major management company through my persistent efforts. Recalling how he said how the door of hardship was opened wide, it really seemed like I didn't succeed easily.

First, I didn't get assigned to an actor like I wanted, but to Neptune. Neptune appeared on Next K-Star and from the initial success, it would be greenlit for more seasons.

Neptune received insults from appearing on the show, however, in the end, their popularity rose. Their next album was a big hit and they placed first in a music broadcast.

Remembering how future me said that it was the start of a relationship with Neptune, it seemed like I would continue to have more relations with them...

And Gunyoung was the bastard who backstabbed me.

Was there anything else? Ah, one more. I deducted I was single in the future as I didn't have a ring on my ring finger. It was either I was unmarried even at forty or I was divorced. I couldn't tell which one was worse.

This was all the information I collected from seeing the future three times.

Wait, but...

I changed the present. Instead of getting backstabbed by the traitor, I was the one who became the Lucky Charm as the one who connected Producer Joontae with Neptune.

Perhaps, the future changed?

When looking at the butterfly effect in movies and dramas, the flutter of a butterfly's wings caused a giant hurricane. What if my actions yesterday were like the fluttering of wings?

It wouldn't stop me from becoming a chairman in the future, right?

No, after seeing the future the first and second time, I had already changed the present. In the future, they said Hyunjo didn't

have a favourable first impression of me so the door of hardship was opened, however, due to me selling out the quadruplets, I was able to fix that. The Lucky Charm title that the traitor, who backstabbed me, took also belonged to me now. Even though the present changed significantly, I didn't notice any signs of the butterfly effect in the future the second and third time.

Then was it... something like a parallel universe?

The future I saw and the present I am currently in have already split into two.

I searched parallel universe on the internet. An incredible amount of information popped up. I changed my posture and started to read it.

However, like a side effect, sleepiness started to overcome me after reading for a short while. I shook my head in an attempt to keep myself awake. I would have to get ready for work soon.

I couldn't be the new recruit who was late on his second day of work...

I couldn't...

Chapter 11: Start With Entertainment, Next K-Star (1)

“Gasp!”

I woke up with a start when my phone rang.

As soon as I was clear-headed, the first thought on my mind was that I was in trouble.

When did I fall asleep? What time was it now?

The sky outside still looked dark, but since it rained early in the morning, it could just be clouds. I clumsily searched for my watch.

Fortunately, it was exactly 7 a.m. Although I did fall asleep, it was only for 10 minutes.

As soon as I relaxed, I was overcome with drowsiness and exhaustion. I rubbed my face with both my hands before answering the phone.

“Thanks, brother. I had to get to work by 8 and if it wasn’t for you, I might have been late.”

-When did you get home?

“Past 6.”

-What? And you’re going to work again? But you’re probably really tired, what are you going to do?

“What do mean what am I going to do. I still have to go to work.”

Now… It was time for me to make an accurate assessment of the situation and quickly decide.

If I was to get a taxi, I probably didn’t have to get ready this instant. If I wanted to take the subway, I would have to get ready now. Wait. The traffic might be slow. If I grabbed a taxi and I had to get off to ride the subway halfway, it would be the worst situation. I chose the safe route and decided to take the subway.

I got up and went to my bathroom. I turned on the tap and I was troubled while I was waiting for the water to turn warm.

Should I wash my hair or not?

-How was it yesterday?

“…It was dynamic. But, yesterday, they complimented me, saying I did a good job.”

Since it was my second day, I decided to wash my hair. I chose not to use conditioner, just shampoo.

-That's a relief. Try to end early today so we can go for a drink and talk about our work.

"I'd like that too. Let's do that!"

-And call mother. She's probably waiting.

"Yeah, I will."

I was about to hang up, but I heard noisy voices on the other end.

-Dad, dad, is it uncle? Me too! Hand me the phone too! Hand it to me first! (Kids, your dad is talki...) I have something to ask him! Memememe!

He wasn't able to hold on for long before the phone fell to the hands of the elementary schoolers. As I brushed my teeth, I waited for the victor of the fight to talk.

-Uncle! Did you see a lot of celebrities yesterday? Who did you see?

"I saw all the singers that appeared on KpopCon."

-Oh, my god! You must have been really happy! Uncle, you're freaking cool! I'm freaking jealous!"

“Freaking co… You shouldn’t say…”

-Can you take me along with you next time?

“I can’t. Now hang up. Uncle has to go to work.”

I coolly refused the clinging girl and hung up. It would be disastrous if I lost my authority over my nieces and nephews. Seniority wasn’t only important in the entertainment world. It was important here as well. If my authority crumbled, they would all try to climb over me and I would eventually end up at the bottom.

That would be horrible…

I washed my hair incredibly quickly. Yesterday I paid attention to my hair as I wore a suit, but there was no need to today. I just dried it off with a towel. I recalled on my failure yesterday and dressed casually. A hoodie and jeans. Coat.

Was it too casual? There was a meeting today.

I troubled over the decision for 10 seconds before changing into slacks and a knit sweater. It took 8 minutes to walk to the subway station from my one-room. I didn’t know if it was because it was too early, but the subway was emptier than usual.

As I looked around, I saw office workers on their way to work and students on their way to school. Those wearing casual clothes over there were university students.

I felt weird. I thought there would be a big change once I graduated school and became an employee. I thought I would see a different world like a chick breaking out of its egg or a frog that had left the well...

But that really wasn't the case. So this was why my brother laughed so hard when I told him.

While waiting for the subway train, I called home.

-Hello?

"Mom, it's me. I got off work late yesterday so I couldn't call you."

-Actually, I ended up going to sleep after waiting. Was there a lot of work on your first day?

My mom's voice was filled with concern.

My parents left our home in Seoul to my brother and went to the countryside as soon as I completed my mandatory military service. The cost of living in Seoul was too high and since my father's health wasn't very good, they decided to recuperate in the fresh air of the countryside.

His health has recovered a lot these days and they work on a small field and raise a dog.

My brother who was already in his forties was living well with his family and the quadruplets were already in their senior year of elementary school so they would grow quickly without constant supervision. I wasn't sure if it was because of this, but my parents would spend more attention on me nowadays.

"Nah, I was late because of the welcoming party. Don't worry. Anything happening at home? How's father's health?"

-We are doing well. How was work? Was it okay? You always said you wanted to do it, but do you really enjoy it?

"It's really fun. The people I work with are all good too."

Except one.

-Yesterday, your aunts came and we ate dinner together. When we discussed that you were working with actors, all the kids were in a frenzy. They kept asking for autographs.

"...Really? But, I wasn't assigned to an actor, but a singer. A girl group."

-A girl group?

“They’re called Neptune; you probably haven’t heard of them. Next time I go home; I’ll bring you a picture.”

-Okay. If you have any troubles at work, tell your brother. Okay?

He had already been of great help to me this morning. When I was about to tell her my brother’s morning call, the subway train arrived.

“Okay. The subway’s here. I’ll call you later.”

I quickly hung up the phone and sat on the subway. It was 7:30 right now… since the company wasn’t far from the subway station, I probably wouldn’t be late. To not fall asleep and miss my stop, I tried to keep my eyes open.

Should I listen to some songs? As I was looking for my earphones, the two girls wearing school uniforms sitting next to me were making a fuss.

“Hey hey hey, big news! Lee Yoolam of Lemon Girls got in trouble. She’s the most trending right now.”

“What is it? What kind of trouble?”

The two stuck their heads together and looked at the phone screen.

“It says it’s a DUI. Oh, my god. It says she was with her non-celebrity boyfriend. Wasn’t she the one who kept promoting that she never had a boyfriend? Her male fans probably crumbled like cookies.”

“Yeah, they were really promoting how hard they were preparing for Next K-Star…”

“They were dropped out from that. It says that Neptune will replace them?”

“Never heard of them before. I guess the staff was really in a hurry.”

I quickly checked the internet. Looking at the community site, I saw that everything related to this issue was trending.

Lemon Girls Lee Yoolam. Lee Yoolam DUI. Lee Yoolam’s Boyfriend. Next K-Star was 4th in ranking. I didn’t find Neptune though.

Celebrity News articles only had provocative headlines.

[Lemon Girls Lee Yoolam charged without detention, a date during the day with her civilian boyfriend?] [Claimed Forever Single Lee Yoolam’s Secret Boyfriend and DUI? ‘Shocking’] [Lee Yoolam charged with DUI, fans ‘shocked’, Dropped out of Next K-Star]

As I read starting from the last page, the flow of articles was quite amusing.

At first, the articles were focused on Yoolam's charges. There were a bunch of articles that seemed to be copy-pasted that were posted afterwards.

Cold water has been poured on Lemon Girls' Lee Yoolam, who was recently rising in popularity in the entertainment scene and was set to appear on this year's huge public weekend entertainment program. Yesterday afternoon, Lee Yoolam was charged without detention when she was exposed driving under influence with her civilian boyfriend. Her alcohol blood level was 0.107 and her driver's license was revoked...

The main article had thousands of comments and a large number of people agreed with the insults and cynical remarks criticizing her. She had already become the focus of public mockery and branded as a wretch.

Sparks even flew to Next K-Star.

Netizens shot comments like 'Did Next K-Star promote worldwide popularity by signing this kind of girl,' 'I guess we know the standard of cable TV,' 'Did you think a criminal like her was going to be a worldwide Korean star?' at the staff.

The reporters reacted to these comments of criticism by quickly writing more articles catering to that audience.

[Lemon Girls' Lee Yoolam Charged, Trouble before the broadcast of 'Next K-Star'] ['DUI' Lee Yoolam, Will she continue to appear on Next K-Star?]

After these articles covered on the front page for a while, articles of Lemon Girls dropping out of the program appeared. Those articles started the same as the previous articles.

However, the nuance changed in the middle.

Meanwhile, Knet's new program, 'Next K-Star', which Lemon Girls dropped out of, is a program that tests 8 new rising idol groups with great potential on various themes, such as songs, dance and entertainment, to find the group who will become the next generation Kpop Star...

The article began with a provocative story focused on Lee Yoolam, however, it suddenly changed and promoted the program. The PR team of Knet had started to make their move.

I could tell that their intentions were to quickly pull out of Lemon Girls' Lee Yoolam's DUI Scandal and to use the trending topic to promote their program aggressively. At the end, there even was an interview with Producer Go Joontae.

And I finally found Neptune's name on there.

Next K-Star's Producer Go Joontae expressed his deep regrets

about Lemon Girls dropping out of the program under such scandalous circumstances. He shed new light on the topic by saying, “After holding an emergency meeting with staff last night, we have decided to fill the empty seat with a 4-member group known as Neptune,” and “Neptune was a group that was sadly cut from the final line-up. They have a lot of potential and appeal, so we believe that they are a group that fits well with the objective of Next K-Star.”

Also, Producer Go Joontae requested, “We sincerely apologize for the public criticism of the program before its broadcast. To make good out of this unfortunate event, we promise that we will create a program with a high degree of perfection to meet our viewers’ expectations. We hope that you will watch over this with interest.”

Chapter 12: Start With Entertainment, Next K-Star (2)

The comment section contained more than two thousand comments. Most the comments were criticizing Lemon Girls and Yoolam, but I found a few about Next K-Star. Most were saying that it was good that the staff's reaction was quick.

Luckily, there weren't many mean comments aimed at Neptune. Not many gave them any attention.

Like they were going to wait and see since the producer said they had potential?

If it was under normal circumstances, there would have been plenty of mean comments on how Neptune pushed out Lemon Girls for the spot, but the trouble Yoolam caused was so big that it seemed that the majority of the mean commenters were focused on her.

When I searched for Neptune, I saw some articles with Neptune in their headlines.

[Who is 'Neptune' who is replacing Lemon Girls on Next K-Star?] [Neptune joins [Next K-Star', who are they...]

When I clicked on the article, it was about their profiles, their failed album and their current activities related to their new single. There were even new pictures of the members. At the

bottom, it said it was provided by W&U.

Looking at the comments, there were quite a few complimenting their appearance. As I was saving each one and reading it, I saw some unbelievable comments.

-I guess they're there for their looks. Since it's a competition program, they'll probably just leave them at the bottom.

-Huge advantage for the other teams. Kekekekeke

There were tens of people agreeing with them. I was speechless.

I logged on to reply, but a keyboard warrior had already entered the fray. It was under the nickname 'Neptune Mom' and when I examined other comments, the person had already replied to a huge number of them, mostly protecting and supporting Neptune. Although the person wasn't swearing, his fighting strength was at max level and the mean commenters were dropping off one by one.

Was there already a fan of Neptune?

While carefully reading these articles and comments, my sleepiness went away. Instead, I was flooded with feelings of excitement and delight. Hyunjo's words were correct. The feeling of watching a new group grow in popularity and be acknowledged... This really was addicting.

Well, it wasn't like I took care of them myself. However, as I

contributed to this incident, I definitely had the right to feel satisfied. Of course, of course.

The subway stopped shortly. It was my stop. As I arrived at the company listening to Neptune's songs, I got a call. It was Hyunjo. It was 7:53 right now. Safe!

"Hello?"

-You on your way?

This person, why is he constantly going back and forth between formal and casual speech? So inconsistent.

"I am right at the door. What floor should I go to?"

-The management team is on the 4th floor. Come to meeting room B. Don't come empty handed, there's a coffee shop in front of the company so buy some coffee. Two hot cups of Americano...

I promptly pressed the record button.

-One vanilla latte, one café mocha with whipped cream... wait, Gunyoung, what did you want... one cappuccino and get whatever you want.

"Yes, I will."

-Did you remember it all?

“I recorded it.”

-Hey, good job.

I never imagined I would hear a compliment for getting coffee.

I went back outside. As soon as I crossed the street, I saw a 24-hour coffee shop. I placed the coffees in a box and held it with both hands.

Although I wasn’t worried about being late, I hurriedly returned to not let the coffees cool down.

“Ah, crap, what floor was it?”

I forgot.

To call again after hearing that I did a good job was a bit... it just so happened there was a man already on the elevator so I quickly went on.

“Excuse me, what floor is management team 3 on?”

“On the fourth floor. Would you like me to press it for you?”

“Thank you!”

His voice was killer. Was he an employee?

When I looked to the side, I was surprised. It was the movie star, Sung Dowon.

He was the top actor representing 20-year-olds. Very tall with wide shoulders of a swimmer, even if he wore rags, he was blessed with a body that would make even the rags look good. His good looks couldn’t even be covered by sunglasses.

However, Sung Dowon wasn’t an actor known just for his good looks. His acting skills were equally great. He even had an influence on box office sales.

His drama was a big hit in China and his two recent movies even reached 10 million and 6 million viewers respectively, raising his value in the Chungmuro District daily.

I remembered reading how W&U lured him in with a huge payment and a chance to move onto Hollywood when he ended his previous contract, but I never thought I would see him so soon.

Well, since this was fate, I should ask him for a handshake… as soon as I thought that, the scene in front of my eyes faded out.

Was this the future?

However, it was a bit different this time.

Like a screen with a signal that kept dropping, my surroundings were hazy. What was this?

Also, until now, the futures I had seen took place during an interview with Director Park and Reporter Song, but I was sitting in front of a man in an unfamiliar office. It looked like there were other people around us, but it was too hazy to make them out and I could only just barely make out the face of the man in front of me.

Huh?

It was Sung Dowon. It was Sung Dowon smiling without his sunglasses on. He didn't look any older. It was the same face I saw just a few moments ago.

Really, what was this?

While I fell into a state of utter confusion I could hear Dowon's voice.

"You're my savior. If it wasn't for Mr. Sunwoo, I would have been caught in their trap and my life as an actor could have been over. And because of this..."

Saviour? Me? What was this trap now?

“I hope that Mr. Sunwoo could become my manager.”

…!

“We’ve arrived at the fourth floor.”

The same voice overlapped. As I woke up from my previous state, Dowon was pressing the open button on the elevator.

“Th-thank you.”

I exited the elevator in a dazed state.

“I hope you have a great day.”

“…Hope you have a great day.”

The elevator went up carrying Dowon. I was dumbly looking at the closed elevator doors.

What was that just now?

It was definitely different from the future I saw yesterday. The hazy surroundings and the time I experienced the future was short. Above all, it didn’t seem like a distant future.

When would this happen? There just weren't enough hints.

He said I helped him? So, would there really be an incident in the future? Would there?

For Sung Dowon to ask me to be his manager... If I could answer, I would have said okay right away.

Although I did think about Neptune briefly and although I was starting to learn the pleasures and satisfaction of taking care of a new group, as expected, I still wanted to be an actor's manager. And it was even Sung Dowon.

"What are you doing over there? Hurry up."

A familiar voice brought me back to reality. Facing the elevator was meeting room B. The traitor's upper body was sticking out of the half-opened door as he gestured with his finger.

Let's leave the future that I am uncertain when will happen and focus on the present, the present.

After checking that the coffees were fine, I hurriedly entered the meeting room.

"Hello! I brought the coffee."

"I'll give you the money for the coffee later."

It seemed like Hyunjo has decided to speak casually. I told you to do it before.

Besides Hyunjo and Gunyoung, there were two women and a man in the meeting room. As I was greeting everyone, I was startled when I saw Hyunjo's outfit. Jeans and a loose man-to-man t-shirt. It was the same clothes as yesterday.

Don't tell me he didn't go home after the bar, but to the company?

"This here is the new recruit, Jung Sunwoo and they are members of the PR team."

I matched their faces to their names in my mind. The skinny woman with no makeup in her 30s was Team Leader Park of the PR team. And the pair below her seemed to be the same age as me.

Although I failed to leave a good first impression yesterday, today I will!

"I am Jung Sunwoo. Pleased to meet you all."

"Coffee!"

"Let's talk after drinking some coffee. I think I'm going to die."

I lost to coffee.

I took my share of the coffee and crammed into an empty seat.

Honestly, I had some expectations for my first meeting. I imagined a scene of men in suits and women in white blouses and H line skirts sitting with their legs crossed seriously discussing matters.

When they got tired, they would relax with a cup of coffee... Well, although it wasn't to that point, I did expect something similar.

Hahaha. Useless expectations.

This place looked more like PC bang[1] than a meeting room. There were laptops and paper spread all over the table and the people looked like game addicts drinking coffee after just finishing an all-nighter gaming session.

"You're Team 3's Lucky Charm, right?"

Team Leader Park looked at me and asked abruptly.

"Pardon?"

"Aren't you the Lucky Charm of Management Team 3? The one who grabbed a big fish on his first day. Congrats."

“I guess there really is something like beginner’s luck, team leader.”

“How did he get such a fortunate encounter? Did he save a nation in his past life?”

“He did what we couldn’t do in 2 years in a day… what a cruel world.”

The trio of the PR Team took me as an appetizer as they conversed about me.

The traitor looked uninterested and Hyunjo was busy on his phone. I didn’t know who kept trying to contact him, but his phone was vibrating nonstop.

Team Leader Park glanced at Hyunjo’s phone.

“Looking at how busy Chief’s phone is ringing, it seems like Neptune will be busy from now on.”

“Looks to be that way. It seems like work will finally be enjoyable.”

“You have to row when the tide comes in. Toss us anything that looks article-worthy about Neptune. Both of you new recruits as well.”

“Yes.”

I didn’t know what she was going to do, but I answered anyways. Fortunately, Team Leader Park explained right away.

“Just record anything that seems like it would get a decent reaction. The girls playing with each other, what they are eating, even them tripping while walking. It doesn’t matter if we end up using them or not, the more we have the better.”

She explained that if there were decent pictures, they would upload them on Neptune’s official social media accounts and use them for articles and they would keep funny stories of their daily life for talk shows or interviews.

They said it was better to start gathering them now, than using boring stories that would get edited out or making them up on the fly later on.

“I heard Seoyoung thought Producer Joontae was a fan and wanted to give him her autograph. Stuff like that.”

“Oh? How did you know that?”

The ones who knew that were Seoyoung, Producer Joontae and myself.

“We’re the PR team.”

She smiled cunningly.

Notes:

1] PC bang is a Korean LAN gaming center, where people pay to play games on computers. ($0.43-1.27 USD per hour)

Chapter 13: Start With Entertainment, Next K-Star (3)

“However, team leader.”

Hyunjo tapped the table with his finger as he pondered.

“Don’t you think that we’ll get criticized if we release articles too aggressively? Netizens these days are quick-witted and are able to tell if an article was sponsored by their agency or not.”

“That’s why we have to make sure we’re not too aggressive.”

“Was it Star Trend? Not long ago, I couldn’t read their one of their articles since it was plastered with words like successful debut, strong impression and rising star.”

“I will make sure to tell them to refrain from doing that. We all know they flopped so it would have been embarrassing... The reporter’s intern probably wrote it.”

Listening to the conversation, I started to connect the relationship between the management team, PR team and reporters.

A manager would hand over article-worthy materials to the PR team and the PR team would send it out or give it to a close reporter to release a more sincerely written article.

If the celebrity had enough following, that article would be copied exactly by other mass media outlets, in other words, Urakkai articles[1]. If not, it would be buried without any replies.

Just like Neptune's articles that could only be found by searching through a search engine.

"And Chief. The afternoon interview we have scheduled today."

"The G-Today one?"

"Yes. I think it's best we tell them not to say, 'it must have been hard', 'you guys have endured a lot,' excessively. We might get reactions like, 'Just how hard could being a celebrity be?' and 'Who in the world hasn't endured a lot.'"

"Then I guess we'll just have to say that we'll try our best."

"That's probably the best. Since they are going in as a replacement, if they even look a bit bad, then they will probably get criticized."

"Then let's wait for the reactions of the first broadcast before moving forward..."

I didn't know when, but the meeting was proceeding more and more like a meeting. Even the male-female pair were tapping on

their laptops. They were writing something on Word.

I didn't feel right just sitting there so I took out a new notebook and jotted down the words coming out of Team Leader Park and Hyunjo's mouths.

"What do you think about asking Blackout to mention them on their Instagram account? If the article headline contained both Blackout and Neptune, I think it will have quite the media following."

"Let's wait on that. When we showed them off last time as Blackout's younger sister group, the reactions weren't very good. If something goes wrong, Neptune, who are just starting to get attention, might be branded as unlikeable. Blackout fans are so intense."

"If we do that, the company will even receive complaints."

"That's right. Hundred percent right. Hundred percent."

Team Leader Park who was scratching her head suddenly asked.

"But, Chief. The Neptune girls have no personal problems, right?"

"They don't."

“If there is anything that can’t be revealed to the reporters, we have to know first. What could have been stopped with a short-handled hoe will grow to something that can’t be stopped with a shovel[2].”

“They really don’t.”

“No one with a boyfriend? The rapper from Punchline seems to have taken a liking to Songha.”

Hyunjo was surprised.

“Who’s the bastard, are you sure?”

“I’m just telling you what I heard from their stylist. You have to say I’m almost sure. Punchline will appear together with Neptune on Next K-Star. Since they already have a fanbase, it’ll be bad if there’s a scandal. We really can’t.”

“I know that already. I’ll keep a careful watch.”

“Both of you should watch them with care as well.”

Team Leader Park advised as she looked at Gunyoung and me.

“If a suspicious situation arises, we’ll tell you immediately.”

“Yes.”

I noted down some suspicious situations and underlined the words, ‘The Bastard who raps in Punchline’, a few times. If a nationwide emotional scandal pops up, the female side is usually the one to get harmed. Although it had only been a day since I had met Neptune and Songha, they were the still the first celebrities I was assigned to. It was obvious I wasn’t going to look at the bastard who raps in Punchline favorably.

“And…”

Rattle.

As the door opened, a man I had never seen before popped his head in. He had the friendly impression of a hyung next door.

“Oh my, I’m sorry to bother you while you’re busy. I just had an urgent favor to ask Team Leader Park.”

“What is it?”

“Our Chaeyoung is going to a preview tomorrow.”

Chaeyoung? Did he mean Son Chaeyoung?

Although she was only in her mid-twenties, she was an actress who started out as a child actress and has more than ten years of

acting experience under her belt. Although she didn't have the fame of Sung Dowon, she was still someone who's name would always appear on the headlines of top articles. Even her filmography was robust.

I went to see a movie that cast Son Chaeyoung as an innocent university student three times.

Was this person Chaeyoung's manager?

The person who saved a nation in his past life wasn't me, but this person.

"She's going to wear a Balmain one-piece dress and she's asking if you could write an article that says she wore it better than a model."

"Are you talking about that combat uniform-like one-piece dress? Is she going to wear that? Chief Jo, you should have stopped her."

"Since there isn't much time left until her contract renewal, could you please release an article. Team Leader Park has a lot of reporters she has close ties with. Please save me."

Team Leader Park sighed at Chief Jo's exaggerations.

"It's not a problem to release an article, but that dress really doesn't suit her."

“I guess we’ll hear lots of insults like ‘her stylist is her anti-fan’ and ‘what’s her agency doing’ again.”

As the PR employees were mumbling, Chief Jo kept exaggerating his hardship while pleading.

“Ah, by the way!”

The person who was about to leave turned back around.

“Are you two new?”

Gunyoung and I who were waiting for the right time to greet him both got up at the same time.

“Hello, I am Jung Sunwoo.”

“I am Choi Gunyoung.”

“Yeah. It seems like they change whenever I am about to familiarize with them. Since you guys have good appearances, it looks like you’ll have some stamina. If you start on this team, you’ll adapt quickly to wherever you go next. Let’s talk longer when we have a company get-together.”

“Yes, I under…”

“Good luck!”

Slam!

We stared at the door for a moment, but it didn’t open again.

Afterwards, the meeting went on for another hour. During that hour, I filled two pages with notes and admired Team Leader Park and her employees. Even though I had only met them a little while ago, I felt friendly with them like I had worked with them for a few months.

Incredible people…

“Take this.”

Hyunjo tossed the van keys at Gunyoung.

“I have continuous meetings lined up today. So you guys need to prepare for the G-Today’s interview.”

“Us?”

“Gunyoung, you must have done it before. I’ve already called Taehee, so go take the girls to the shop, their stylists will be on their way as well. After putting on their outfits, they just need to go to the newspaper company. A reporter will guide you once you

arrive. I'll get there before the interview starts."

He said while staring at his notebook. In the schedule section, his schedule was densely packed with things he had to do today.

"The girls' residence and shop address are already on the GPS so you just need to follow that and I'll send you the stylists' phone numbers, company address and the reporter's contact information via text message. Eat lunch at the shop like yesterday. Since the interview is at 2, be there by 1:30 at the latest. If there are any problems, call me. Okay?"

"Yes."

"Right, at night, we have a preliminary meeting/ dinner with the staff of Next K-Star. It'll probably take a while. I already told the girls, so just letting you guys know."

"Pardon?"

"Go, quickly!"

The traitor and I hurriedly packed our bags and went on the elevator.

Getting off work today was off the table again.

I sent a Kakao message[3]

“Since it’s 9:30 already… If we want to get there by 1:30 we don’t have any time to waste.”

“Why does this place progress so fast on so little time.”

“When Next K-Star starts, we might even have to start living at the company.”

“It looks like the chief already lives here.”

“Yeah. He said he slept at the company yesterday.”

It was hard to talk like there was nothing wrong.

I understood why mind readers in movies and dramas were portrayed as cynical and warped characters. I was already uncomfortable knowing one person who was different on the outside from the inside, imagine how horrible it would be to see what was on everyone’s minds.

How fortunate I was for not having a mind-reading ability.

I shook my head as I inwardly sent my support to a mind-reader I didn’t know existed.

Soon, the elevator arrived at the basement. The van was where we parked it yesterday. We stopped in front of the driver’s seat.

There were two people, but only one could be the driver.

"You good at driving?"

The traitor asked first.

I got my license as soon as I graduated high school. After that, I only used my brother's car a few times. Although I received some training prior to this job, I was honestly a bit scared of driving in the complicated streets of Cheongdam-dong.

As I cleared my throat, the traitor opened the door of the driver's seat.

"I'll drive."

"Sure. I'll make up for it by shuttling our lunches."

I didn't decline and got on the passenger's seat. As soon as we operated the GPS, the van started to move smoothly.

The traitor was even good at driving. Well, he did say he drove when he was working part-time for Blackout.

On our way to their residence, I searched Sung Dowon on the internet. During the meeting, my concentration almost broke a few times because of sudden thoughts of Dowon. Now, I could leisurely search to my heart's content.

Let’s see… Sung Dowon’s recent condition, rumors on his new movie, groundless tabloids. I thoroughly went through information related to Sung Dowon. There weren’t a lot of negative public opinions.

There was a recent article about Dowon’s worth. $60, 000 per episode of nationwide dramas and in China, he received somewhere of $100, 000 per episode.

With articles like these, there would usually be some disruptions in public opinion, however, the majority reaction was that he deserved it. He really was an actor with a very good public image.

Handsome, good acting skills, a lot of charity work and had never caused any controversy in an interview or on social media. There wasn’t even a single wrinkle.

Just what happened to an actor like him? Just how big was the incident that Sung Dowon himself would say that his life as an actor could have been over? And what did he mean by he almost fell for their trap? And who were ‘they’?

And why was the future I saw earlier different from the past?

Ah damn… I so curious I could die!

Notes:

1] 우라까이 (Urakkai) articles are just copy-pasted articles with just slight deviations from the original. It is not seen often in America, but seems to be common enough in Korea for there to be a word for it

2] Korean Idiom, just thought you guys might find it weird. It's quite self-explanatory. Sort of on the line of 'Don't make a mountain out of a molehill'

3] Kakao is a popular Korean messaging platform, sort of like Facebook's Messenger

Chapter 14: Start With Entertainment, Next K-Star (4)

We arrived at their residence 15 minutes later. It looked dull when I saw it yesterday, but now that I was looking at it under the bright sunshine, it was completely different. Its white walls covered with ivy had a charming appeal to it.

I pressed the doorbell when we got to the 5th floor. I didn't know the door passcode yet. Since it looked like they've been through a number of managers and since they would have had to change the door passcode every time a manager quit, it seemed like they don't reveal the passcode easily.

"Who is it?"

Seoyoung peeked out as the door opened to the length of the safety chain.

"It's us. Chief's busy so we're the only ones who came."

"Wait a bit!"

After the door closed, it opened up widely. We carefully entered. Although it was our second time, we still weren't used to it. The traitor's arms and legs were already stiff. Was he really nervous or was it just his thing?

“You guys came?”

“Yup, good morning.”

The members huddled around the living room as they greeted us. And they stared up at me, the both of us. I guessed the reason why they looked more energetic than yesterday was because of Next K-Star.

A morning greeted by dazzling beauties. Even without sleep, I was energized and felt full without eating.

If the future I saw really happens, then I guess I would miss this scene.

“Although we heard from Hyunjo oppa and Team Leader Park over a hundred times on the phone… I still think I have to hear it in person to really feel that it’s happening. Are we really going on Next K-Star? As a permanent member?”

Seoyoung asked while fiddling with her fingers. Both her eyes were shining and her lips were sealed shut. It wasn’t just Seoyoung, but Taehee and LJ who were on the sofa and Songha who was laying on the rug were waiting for our reply.

“That’s right.”

Both the traitor and I said simultaneously.

“Kyah!”

Seoyoung jumped up and down. Her chest underneath her loose t-shirt bounced along with her. She was really cute. I have to take a picture of this. I quickly took out my phone and took a picture. Of course, above her shoulders.

As soon as they heard the shutter sound, all the girls looked at me.

“I did it because the PR team leader told me to take a lot of pictures.”

I confidently gave my reasoning and took more pictures of the girls gathered in the living room. They were indeed celebrities, as soon as the lens faced their direction, their poses and expressions changed. When I checked to see how the pictures turned out, there was nothing to throw out.

“What do I do, I’m so happy. I kept thinking it was a dream and constantly searched for articles.”

Seoyoung was still holding her phone in her hand.

“Don’t look at it too much, stupid.”

LJ kicked Seoyoung’s leg.

“There are mean comments as well.”

“I like the mean comments, though. It’s our first time getting attention, who are we to discriminate?”

“Let’s see how long you like it.”

“Stop acting like you’re so calm. I know you called your parents to tell them this morning. You spent two hours on an international call when your dirt poor!”

Seoyoung smirked while provoking her. LJ had a fit and suddenly got up from the sofa.

“I’m not the one who called. My mom called when she saw the article! And it’s not that I am acting calm, I’m being cautious!”

From the looks of it, the one who looked really calm was Songha. I didn’t know if she had nerves of steel or if she looked that way because she had a poker face.

At the moment, she was eating chips while rolling about on the rug. Crumbs fell on the rug. Well, she was better than my brother’s kids as she cleaned it up.

By picking up each one and emptying in her mouth…

“I think we need to start getting ready.”

The traitor gestured towards the clock.

“We don’t have a lot of time since the interview is at 2.”

“We’re ready. We can go.”

Songha was the first one up. The other members went to their rooms and brought things like bags and hats with them. They did well by themselves. I was worried because it was only the traitor and me, but it seemed like everything would progress smoothly even without Hyunjo.

Though Seoyoung almost fell twice while looking at her phone and it did get quite noisy when LJ stole it.

We got in the van as we exited the apartment. The traitor took his place in the driver’s seat.

“The shop address… it’s this one.”

I set the GPS to the shop address and put on my seat belt. When I looked back to the rear seats, I saw that none of the members put on their seat belts and were preoccupied practicing what they would say in the interview.

“Everyone should put on their seat belts when they get in a car.”

As soon as I said that, I did a double take. Did I act like a man with 4 kids again?

Whenever my habits from taking care of the quadruplets popped out, my friends would humiliate me by calling me Jungjumma, Jung-Parent, Jung-Mom.

When I glanced back, luckily the members seemed to just go along with it. They lowered their heads and put on their seat belts.

I felt relieved as I took a picture of that scene as well.

The boredom of waiting at the shop was endurable today. While the girls were getting their makeup and hair done, the traitor and I sat on the sofa gathering information from articles on Next K-Star.

The name of the program was ‘Next K-Star’.

It was the follow-up to the survival audition program that was just finishing its seventh season. It seemed like the program was filling in since it took a long time to prepare for audition programs.

Although I didn’t know as I was uninterested, there was a lot of interest in Next K-Star considering it was a new program.

Did the appearance of idols have a positive effect?

From the looks of it, it was because their looks were much better than average and although they were all new, there were some boy groups who already had a fandom. If you were to take into account all the buzz on social media and community sites, there were a considerable number of fans promoting Next K-Star.

Of course, even the studio was spending a lot on promotions as well. As the viewership of audition programs which brought a boom to the cable industry was steadily declining every season, the studio was probably quite desperate to find another hit program.

Maybe it was because the studio had already sucked out as much as it could from audition programs that they were now directly pushing a head-to-head competition between idols.

It was a concept where 4 girl groups and 4 boy groups, 8 teams in total, would compete against each other and one would come out on top to receive the title of Next K-Star.

They competed in various themes. In the article, it stated that they would compete in fields like singing, dancing and modeling as well as their performance on entertainment programs.

After the competition, the winner would be determined by the group who received the highest score from guest judges and the text message votes from viewers. If the staff were successful in just raising the groups' popularity, there was no way it wouldn't be a topic of interest.

The prize for winning was a 7-part reality TV series produced by

Knet and the right to attend the esteemed Knet's Asian Music Awards, where only outstanding Kpop stars could attend. From my eyes, it looked like it would be a considerably good chance for them.

"Fans are probably going to fight a lot during the viewer voting process."

They would probably go crazy trying to make their teams win.

The traitor nodded in agreement.

"Well, they put viewer voting in there for that. It raises the show's popularity. Since the voting process will be in a league of their own."

"What?"

"If girl groups are pitted against boy groups, the girl groups' fandoms will lose out, so the winner should be from one of the boy groups. Even the audition program never had a female winner for its past 7 seasons."

"Really? Then I guess we need to give up on trying to win and focus on gaining popularity."

"Producer Go Joontae is a really aggressive editor so if we're unlucky, we might only receive tons of insults."

That’s right. There will always be a sacrificial lamb in a devil’s editing process. Since it said that Neptune received a lot of insults, the girls must have gotten into some sort of trouble. I had to keep my eyes wide open and watch out for whatever it was.

Slam.

Someone entered the shop. It wasn’t a big party like us, only two people. I didn’t know the man who was leading the way, but the man wearing the black snapback looked familiar.

Kim Jonghoon.

He was a hip-hop artist who debuted a long time ago. Since I listened to his songs back when I was in high school. Although he seems to have switched his job to an entertainer from an artist.

When I was living with my parents, so when I still had a TV, Kim Jonghoon was a permanent member of an entertainment show I used to watch frequently.

“Hello, senior!”

Seoyoung with only half her hair curled instantly got up. The other members followed suit and greeted him. Kim Jonghoon looked like a regular middle-aged man surrounded by girls as he waved his hand smiling broadly.

“Wah... I think I am going to come here at this time from now on. Girl group?”

“We are Neptune!”

The charming Seoyoung who was the best at talking took the lead as she introduced the group and her members. Jonghoon’s face became more and more relaxed. While they were introducing each other, the traitor and I also introduced ourselves. Though our target was the manager.

“Hello. We are Neptune’s managers.”

“Yeah, hi. I’m Jonghoon hyung’s manger.”

He had a shaggy beard and I was unsure if he was drinking until morning, but he emitted a strong smell of alcohol every time he breathed.

“They are the ones who are going on Next K-Star, right? There were a lot of articles about that today.”

“Yes, you’re right. Please take care of us.”

“There isn’t anything to ask of me. But, it looks like you guys will be really stressed soon.”

“Pardon?”

“Aren’t there eight teams?”

“That’s right.”

“Then if they all gather in one spot, there will probably be like 50-60 people. It’s not like it’s an idol track meet or anything, fuck. I wouldn’t be able to handle that.”

50-60 people. I didn’t think of that.

During the music broadcast yesterday, it seemed like there was an invisible tension among the groups. I guess Next K-Star would be much worse? Since it wasn’t like we were stuck in our own waiting rooms like during the broadcast, everyone would have to face each other.

This wasn’t a problem of just the fans, it looked like there really could be a fight amongst the teams.

“And…”

Jonghoon’s manager lowered his voice.

“The girls who dropped out because of the DUI, their manager is that asshole, right? The large bastard with the appearance of a dirty gangster.”

“Yes.”

I answered.

“I am just letting you know just in case, be careful of that bastard.”

“Be careful?”

“I saw him a few times, he doesn’t come from a good crowd. If we meet at the studio, he never greets me. Bastard. There are even rumors about him beating the girls he’s in charge of. Rumors of him threatening other managers as well. Anyways, there aren’t just one or two dirty rumors about that bastard.”

He did look that way. Just looking at the way he called a girl he’s in charge of a damn bitch and rag-like bitch… and without any hesitation even though I was watching him.

He really did glare at me for a long while. It probably was due to the suit, if I showed any hints of being a new manager, I think the atmosphere would have turned much more brutal.

“He probably got busted for not taking care of the girls properly, so do you think he’ll look at you who replaced them in a good light? What I’m saying is he could try to let it out on you guys. Just keep that in mind.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“What do you mean thanks… if that bastard really does try to do something, call some reporters.”

“Reporters?”

Not the security or police?

“Reporters work best against bastards like him. Since if they are unlucky, their company’s image could fall with a single article. You guys probably have one or two entertainment reporters you’re familiar with, right?”

“Yes.”

The traitor answered. Damn it. The person the Lemon Girls’ manager was most likely going to fight with seemed to be me, but why was it that the traitor the one on friendly terms with a reporter.

…Nothing will happen, right?

Chapter 15: Start With Entertainment, Next K-Star (5)

Jonghoon's manager was a gossiper. His lips wouldn't stop moving. He had been talking about 7 years' worth of problems for almost an hour.

Like how he bowed so much for the first few years that he got a slipped disc and how he used to get drunk after 5 glasses, but now, after drinking with entertainment reporters and producers every night, his limit had increased to 5 bottles. He talked about these things again and again.

At first, I actively responded, but I was getting exhausted.

"Really? We also..."

On the other hand, the traitor was the same as ever, smiling as he agreed with him.

It was one of two things. It was either he really found these stories fun or he was someone who was incredibly good at socializing. Of course, it was probably the latter. If he was normal, there was no way he would find these stories fun.

"Sunwoo."

"Yeah?"

The traitor looked at his watch.

“Looks like we have to get the girls their food soon.”

“I’ll go and buy it.”

I quickly got up. The traitor handed me the credit card.

“I got this from the chief this morning. He said to always get the receipt after we use it.”

“Okay, I’ll be back.”

When I got my coat and was about to leave, I got called over.

“Hey, get us some as well while you’re at it. Here.”

Jonghoon’s manager handed me a $10 bill. He waved the bill in between his hairy fingers.

I should just… So this was why they say if you felt that something is unjust, you needed to succeed.

“…What would you like?”

“Things like soft drinks and chips. Ah, Jonghoon hyung likes potato chips.”

Keep it in. Keep it in.

I buttoned up my coat and exited the shop. Although it was a bit chilly, I felt like I could finally live a little. I thought I was going to die from suffocation.

I put my hands in my pockets and walked a few steps when the door of the shop opened.

“I’ll come with you.”

It was Songha. It seemed like she came out abruptly as she didn’t have any outerwear on.

“Why? Do you need something from the convenience store?”

“I want to pick the ones I want to eat myself.”

“Okay. But how urgent were you to not wear your outerwear?”

“Ah… do you think it’ll be cold?”

“Of course, it will be cold. If you go out like this, your bones are going to chill. I’ll wait so go in and wear something on top.”

Soon after, Songha who was burrowed in a jumper came out.

We kept a reasonable distance between each other. Though our clothes would occasionally brush against each other as we walked. I'm telling you it was just a natural reflex.

Maybe it was because they were going to an interview today, she seemed a lot more natural and prettier than yesterday. Her skin looked clean and dewy and her long, straight, black hair fluttered in the wind.

During the few minutes it took to get to the convenience store, Songha attracted the attention of the passing pedestrians. Male, female, old or young, no matter who it was, those that saw Songha would slow their steps.

And slowly, as they passed by us very slowly, they would admire Songha. After they passed us, they would look back once more.

It wasn't that they recognized Songha, a girl group member. It was that she was just too pretty.

My face burned up. Although I was granted with foresight, at this moment I could read people's minds. They were probably curious about the relationship between Songha and me.

After going through the common choices of friend, sibling and relative, they would think, 'No way they are dating.' They would

look at how our shoulders wouldn't meet even as we walked side-by-side and be pleased.

But, she must be tired of being the center of attention wherever she goes. Was she okay?

When I looked to the side, Songha was calmly playing with her phone. Was she mentally strong or was she just unaware? I thought she was looking at articles like Seoyoung, but I was wrong.

Either call history or text or messaging screen... Was she waiting for someone?

Ring.

"Welcome!"

The part-timer greeted courteously as we entered the store.

To Songha.

I picked up the yellow basket at the front and made my way through the store. Whenever I placed an item in the basket, Songha would be busy moving around and dumping 2 or 3 items in it. The basket was already getting heavy.

After placing Seoyoung's zero calorie pudding in the basket, I was about to make my way to the counter, when my side felt empty. I

didn’t see Songha. Just where did she go again... When I looked around, I saw her waiting for me at the counter already. No, she was staring at something next to the counter.

It was skewered fish cakes with hot steam rising from it. There were all sorts of things in stores these days. It definitely wasn’t here yesterday. She seemed to have good luck when it came to food as well as quite the appetite.

“Do you want to eat one?”

“Can I have two?”

“You can have as many as you want.”

It wasn’t like it was my money anyways.

“I would like this skewered fish cake. Do we have to pay before we eat?”

When I asked the part-timer, he didn’t even give me a glance as he explained to Songha.

That’s enough, you jerk.

“You can eat first and pay all at once later.”

“Okay.”

“Excuse me… but are you a celebrity?”

“Yes. I am Lee Songha of Neptune.”

“Wow, wow, no wonder! Can you take a picture with me later? I will be your fan.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Maybe two…”

Hey, she might choke while eating.

“Can you put these through first?”

Since he was bothering a girl who was eating, I handed him a heavy basket. The part-timer showed his dissatisfaction as he scanned the barcodes.

Songha ate 7 skewers where she stood. She ate so pleasantly, I kept glancing at her. So this was why people watched social eating channels… I wondered if it really was that tasty and had three myself. It was just average.

Anyways, since Songha suggested it, we packed a bowl of fish

cakes to go. There was a mountain of food.

Since he handed me his phone, I took a picture of them. When he checked his phone while making a fuss, his expression stiffened.

Hey, just what were you expecting. It's not my fault you turned out like a squid.

It was the same as before when we made our way back to the shop. People's gazes gathered on us like magnets. Admiring stares at Songha and stares filled with interest, envy and jealousy for me.

If there was one thing that was different than before, it was that our shoulders were slightly brushing against each other. Was it because we ate fish cakes together, it felt like the awkward distance between us shortened a bit. Very little. Around half a step?

While we were walking, Songha checked her phone again. Call history. Text. Talk[1]... I didn't think much of it before, but I suddenly recalled what the PR team leader told me. To check if they were dating or not.

Maybe...

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"My mom and dad."

So it wasn’t like that.

“Thank you.”

Songha unexpectedly thanked me.

“For what?”

Don’t tell me it was because I bought you fish cakes.

“I didn’t buy it with my own money.”

“No, it’s not that... getting us into K-Star. I heard from the chief.”

Ah, that.

It wasn’t easy to read, but was she thinking about K-Star all this time?

“Well, it was only natural. It’s my job.”

I tried my best to not show joy in my voice and expression, but it seemed like I failed. It’s my job? It’s my job? Was this something a new recruit who only worked for two could say? On top of that, in terms of working in society, she was my superior.

“Because of oppa, I am able to work.”

“Hmm?”

“I really wanted to work this whole time…”

“You have always been working.”

“Until now, there were more rest days than work days, but from now on, we have a regular schedule. I like that. I hope Next K-Star doesn’t fail and is successful.”

“Don’t worry. It’s going to be a huge success.”

Since it will have an incredible viewership rating and will continue to have more seasons afterwards.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I have really good senses.”

It was actually going to get good to be exact.

Now that I thought about my foresight ability, I was curious about Songha’s future. Everyone could clearly see she was meant to be a celebrity.

I wondered what her future would be like 20 years from now? Even if Neptune was popular and continued on for a while, by then they would have retired.

What were past girl groups doing these days? There were some who became someone's wife, someone's mother and would appear on child care shows. Some that have continued on as a musical actor or a solo artist. Others who have switched to acting... Wonder what path Songha would walk?

Although I was curious, since my ability didn't help me, there was nothing I could do.

"Then what place do you think we'll be?"

"I heard it would be hard to place in the top since girl groups tend to lack votes... but why do the rankings matter?

"Aren't rankings important?"

"Although it's good if you place high..."

For Neptune whose popularity was at rock bottom, it would be considered a success if they could get their name out there. If they were lucky, their buried albums might even be rediscovered.

It was too greedy to ask for first place on music charts, but it was good if they became a group who were known to sing these kinds of songs.

And if one of the members became a hit with the viewers and became super popular, it would really be like winning the lottery.

“Besides that, I think it’s more worrying that you guys have to constantly compete against other team members.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Wouldn’t it be hard? Psychological warfare and stuff… Seoyoung said it last time. That if you were in another team, you wouldn’t have been able to endure and would have cried and given up.”

Although, it was hard for me to imagine her of all people crying… Well, there was that incident with Sugar Cats yesterday too. It didn’t seem like something that could be glossed over.

Ah right, I learned about it late, but Sugar Cats were also appearing on Next K-Star. I was worried that something might happen on site.

“Oppa, you said you had four nieces and nephews, right?”

“Right.”

“Same with me. Two older sisters and one younger sister, there are four including me and we were all born a year apart.”

That household's parents seemed to have gone through a lot as well.

"I endured in there, so where wouldn't I endure?"

That, I agree with. My nieces all had max level fighting power, so they never came home after getting bullied.

"Four at home and four in the residence. You must have adapted well to your new lifestyle."

"Compared to home, it's heaven."

"It's that bad?"

"In the residence, no one touches the ice cream I write my name on."

My first real conversation with Songha ended with stories about eating.

Notes:

1] Kakao Talk

Chapter 16: An Encounter With The Future (1)

As soon as we returned to the shop, it seemed like the girls were really hungry as they welcomed us aggressively. We handed out the warm lunch boxes from the convenience store as well as other snacks and gave some to Kim Jonghoon and his manager as well as the shop employees.

The traitor and I asked for their understanding.

“Sorry. If we don’t eat now, we won’t have time to eat later.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about us and eat. It’s not like we don’t understand your situation.”

We still nodded our heads. My neck and lower back weren’t able to rest since yesterday.

We opened up the lunch boxes at a corner of the shop. Mine was the bulgogi[1] lunch box. As soon as I smelled the food, my stomach rumbled. I could even hear it growling.

Now that I thought about it, I skipped breakfast. I only had coffee up until now. Being full from looking at the girls’ faces only lasted for a moment.

My chopsticks moved quickly, as I gobbled up my lunch.

As expected. Bulgogi never lets me down.

The girls immediately continued to get their makeup done after putting down their chopsticks. Soon after, they changed into the outfits their stylists brought them and they were ready.

We quickly got in the van. Our destination was G-Today newspaper company which was located in Jongno-District[2]. In articles, the pictures were normally taken inside a café with a nice interior, but was there a place to take pictures in this gloomy building?

I worried they weren't going to be as photogenic when they rushed here without being able to eat properly. If there were embarrassing photos taken due to bad lighting or angles, controversy could pop up saying that they had plastic surgery done.

While the traitor was parking the van in the basement, I called the number of the reporter Hyunjo gave me. A young woman answered after a long while.

-Yes, this is G-Today's Park Woojeong.

"I am Neptune's manager. We have just arrived. Where should we go?"

-Gasp! Y-you're already here?!

The appointment was at 2 and it was 1:40 right now. What did she mean by already?

“Isn’t the interview at 2?”

-That’s right, it’s at 2. But… Ah, damn it.

Ah, damn it?

-Euah, I’m sorry. Can you come to the fourth floor first?

I could hear her scrambling on the other end.

Just what was going on?

First I got off the van. The girls were taking their time fixing their makeup again. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong to me, but the makeup artists were hurriedly applying and touching stuff up.

Hyunjo called and said he was nearby so the traitor went to pick him up while the girls and I made our way up to the fourth floor. Although it was only for a while, since I was in a situation where I was the only one in charge, my body stiffened with nervousness.

Well, it was only for a bit. Nothing would happen, right?

There were a lot of people in the building. I couldn't tell who was a reporter or not, so I greeted everyone I passed. The words, 'Hello, I am Neptune's manager, Jung Sunwoo,' were now a habit.

"Hello, we are Neptune!"

Even the people who didn't give me a glance when I introduced myself concentrated on Neptune's bright and energetic voices.

"Who are they? They're pretty?"

"Are they new? It looks like they've come for an interview."

"I saw them somewhere... Ah, aren't they them? Next K-Star."

They must have thought they were whispering to each other, but I could hear them clearly.

While waiting for the female reporter, I took a peek at the world of reporters and it was mayhem. Papers, newspapers and post-its were everywhere and although there were many people on the phone, the surroundings were still noisy as phones were constantly ringing.

People stricken with complete exhaustion were the same here as W&U.

“Gasp, gasp! Sorry!”

A woman ran towards us. A tightly pulled ponytail and a face with no makeup. The woman who wore large glasses seemed to be in her mid-twenties.

And she seemed oddly familiar.

It was definitely my first time seeing her. And it wasn’t like she had a common face…

“You must have waited for a long time!”

“We had just arrived.”

“Uhh… what do I do? First, first, please come this way.”

The confused female reporter led us to a cramped office pantry.

“Sorry!”

“…We aren’t conducting an interview in here, are we?”

“No! We will have the interview in the interview room, but the person in front of you hasn’t finished yet. I checked everywhere, but all the other meeting rooms were full and this was the only place that was empty… I am really sorry.”

The female reporter brought chairs from different places, but we were still missing some. In the end, the girls who all wearing high heels sat while the reporter and I stood as we talked.

“If things moved as planned, the person in front of you should have been done by now, but that person wasn’t feeling well so he came a bit late.”

Once the door of the office pantry closed, the reporter was embarrassed as her face reddened.

“They say they will be done in 5 minutes, so please wait here until then.”

“Ah… Yes, I understand.”

“Sh-should I get you some coffee? We have instant and ground coffee as well as green tea.”

The reporter made coffee while trying read Neptune’s mood. Her face said that if they want to swear to just get it over and done with, but the girls had no complaints staying in the cramped office pantry. Instead, they were discussing what they should say during the interview and what kind of poses they should make during the photo shoot.

And Seoyoung got up to help make the coffees.

“Miss Reporter, will you be interviewing us?”

“Pardon? Yes, that’s right. I will be doing it.”

“Please take care of us.”

“Of course, definitely! I will pull an all-nighter to write Neptune’s article.”

“Sorry? You look really tired… Don’t work all night.”

“I haven’t slept for three days so I feel like I’m going to die, but I’m going to die after I write Neptune’s article.”

The reporter seemed to like Seoyoung’s charming mannerisms.

“Neptune is going to get their big break this time. Your songs are good and you’re on Next K-Star as well.”

“Really? You’ve listened to our songs?”

“Of course, I listened to the songs of the group I am interviewing. I listened to them continuously on my way to work today.”

Although we waited a lot longer than the 5 minutes the group ahead of us was supposed to take, the mood was peaceful and pleasant.

The female reporter seemed captivated by the Neptune members. Especially Seoyoung. She even boasted how well she could write Neptune's article.

During that time, Hyunjo and the traitor arrived. Hyunjo was speechless when he looked at the girls gathered in the office pantry, but seemed satisfied after listening to the reporter's boastings.

We finally came out of the office pantry after 30 minutes. The reporter led us to the interview room. The interview room was much larger and more comfortable than the office pantry. The girls sat in a line while Hyunjo, the traitor and I took our seats as well.

"Then, shall we sta..."

Clank.

The reporter was talking when a man in his thirties came in.

"Park Woojeong, you go and keep writing those Lemon Girls' articles. It doesn't look like that will drop from first place for a while. Finish 20 articles before you go home today."

"Pardon?! But senior, I am conducting an interview right now?"

“I’ll do this for you. I am going to check tomorrow’s traffic, so don’t slack off.”

“Senior!”

“What are you doing, go quickly!”

Eventually, the female reporter stood up with a depressed face. Her lips were tightly shut as she held herself back. Although this was unfortunate, there wasn’t anything I could do. Even Seoyoung could only half-get up, she wasn’t sure what she could do and she too was unable to keep do anything.

We weren’t in a position where we could point out a reporter’s actions.

“Eeyah, how dazzling. You’re Neptune, right? I am Reporter Hwang Junggu.”

“Yes… Nice to meet you.”

“You must have waited a long time. The one in front of you was the artist Lazy. It took longer since that friend wasn’t feeling well. I heard you guys were waiting in an office pantry. I should have been the one to lead you, that girl is a probationary employee so she doesn’t know much…”

The leaving reporter started. Reporter Hwang Junggu was laughing loudly while discussing briefly with Hyunjo when he was

surprised to see the traitor.

“Huh? Weren’t you Blackout’s manager?”

“That’s right. I was reassigned to this team yesterday.”

“Wow, you have great timing! Neptune will be a hit soon.”

“Haha. Thank you.”

While Reporter Hwang Junggu was talking with the traitor, the female reporter left the room. Reporter Hwang Junggu didn’t care as he spoke.

“But, chief, you should have let us know about Neptune appearing on Next K-Star first. There was also the incident with Lemon Girls, there must have been a lot going on yesterday.”

“That is…”

The interview commenced. Questions asked by Reporter Hwang Junggu were mostly about Next K-Star. How they were cast, how they felt when they knew they were cast, their resolution for appearing on a competition program.

And once in a while, a sensitive question was asked.

What they thought about Lemon Girls' DUI incident, if they were confident in doing better than Lemon Girls... As soon as the girls were having difficulty, Hyunjo answered in their stead or they just glossed over it with smiling faces.

The interview went on. When I saw the traitor return from the washroom, I silently got up. As I walked around with my aching shoulder, I coincidentally met with the female reporter coming out of the women's washroom.

She still looked mad.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes... How's the interview? Is it going well?"

The reporter smiled slightly.

But why did I feel like I've seen her before? It was unsettling.

"Have we..."

Before I could ask if we've seen each other somewhere, I suddenly remembered.

Where I had seen her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, but what did you say your name was?”

“Park Woojeong. Here.”

The reporter took out her wallet and handed me her business card.

Park Woojeong.

If that face aged twenty years and if black lipstick was applied on her lips and her hair was dyed blond and cut short.

Director Park.

Who I saw in the future, the one who came to interview me.

Notes:

1] Bulgogi is fucking great. Grilled marinated beef

2] District in Korea

Chapter 17: An Encounter With The Future (2)

Shivers came down my spine as if I had just watched a horror flick.

Meeting someone you first met in the future in the present was really a strange feeling. How should I describe it? It was sort of like seeing someone pop out of a TV.

“Mr. Manager is Jung...”

“Ah, I’m Jung Sunwoo. My business cards haven’t come out yet, so I don’t have anything I could hand you.”

“Looks like it hasn’t been long since you’ve started working?”

“Today’s my second day at work.”

Park Yoojeong was surprised.

Compared to the dignified Director Park who seemed to have been through a lot, the twenty-something-year-old Park Yoojeong was a bit clumsy and wasn’t good at controlling her expressions.

For this woman in her twenties who is in the bottom of the food chain to become a strong director in twenty years.

You really couldn't tell how one would change in the future.

"I'm the same as you. I'm a new recruit as well."

"Really?"

"It hasn't been long since I've started. Though it does feel like I've worked here for a long time..."

Yoojeong's expression looked complicated and tired. Well, to get dismissed by her senior in front of people, if I was Park Yoojeong, I probably would be in a corner talking to myself 'I'm going to succeed in this dirty world, fuck, fuck'.

"I look forward to working with you in the future, Miss Reporter. You'll be the first person I hand my business card to once they come out."

"In the future..."

Yoojeong hesitated before saying.

"I'm not going to continue being a reporter."

"Sorry?"

“I want to quit. I can’t deal with it anymore. I don’t think it matches me either.”

“…Really? To me, it looks like you’ll be successful as a reporter.”

Really.

She laughed out loud when she heard my words.

“Ehahahaha! …Cough, cough. Even if they are empty words, thank you.”

“They aren’t. I’m serious. If I could, I would even bet on it…”

“You know.”

She suddenly came closer.

“…Since I am going to quit anyways, I’ll let you in on something.”

Her voice quieted down to a whisper.

“Senior Hwang, Report Hwang Junggu. He’s complete trash.”

“Pardon?”

“He’s the type where if you tell him one thing, he’ll write ten things about it. And Lazy who was interviewed before you wasn’t late because he was sick. It became late because Reporter Hwang Junggu gave him the wrong time. When I told him that we had to do Neptune’s interview, he said that Lazy was more important than some new unknown group and to tell them to leave. I was only able to barely convince him by saying they were appearing on Next K-Star and that there was a lot to talk about. For him to push his way in even though he didn’t even know who Neptune was just a while ago, it’s obvious. He’s going to involve Lemon Girls and Next K-Star and write an exclusive article with a bunch of MSG.”

I blankly stared at her. It looked like she was completely relieved that get that off her chest.

So… She’s saying Reporter Hwang Junggu is trash?

“Since W&U is a large company, the PR team will be able to bring the article down as soon it’s up. However, it only takes a moment for Urakkai articles to flood the internet and if that happens, even if your PR team could fly, they wouldn’t be able to handle it. Search Reporter Hwang Junggu and girl group Happy Candy.”

I took out my phone and looked it up like she said. An article Reporter Hwang Junggu wrote not too long ago popped up. Even the headline made me gasp.

[New girl group ‘Happy Candy’ unhappy being known as the 2nd Seraphic]

Happy Candy was a girl group I had never seen before while Seraphic was a well-known top girl group with 10 years of experience. For them to be known as the 2nd Seraphic would have brought criticism, but to feel unhappy... Just what were they thinking saying that?

As expected, the comment section exploded with insults. When I searched the girl group without Reporter Hwang Junggu's name, several articles came up with only slight deviations to the original content.

"Did they really say that during the interview?"

"No. When he asked them, 'You must not feel good being constantly compared to top seniors like Seraphic,' they replied, 'Yes.'"

The nuance was completely different!

"When the article was released, their manager came and pleaded him to change the headline, but he was ignored. Their company was small. And this wasn't the only time."

Just where did this trashy bastard come from?

Was this the incident that made the girls receive a lot of insults?

Considering the influence of an article, it definitely could be possible... Anyways, the girls should be trying their best in the interview right now without knowing anything, I needed to talk to Hyunjo about this and find a countermeasure.

Ah, I need to thank Report Yoojeong first.

“Miss Reporter, thank you for the information.”

“No problem. I am really sorry about the office pantry.”

“I told you that it was fine. Then let’s meet again next time. Ah, also, I almost forgot...”

I thought about it before saying.

“Would I be able to contact you if anything newsworthy comes up?”

For example, if that Lemon Girls’ manager held a grudge and came swinging his fists at me?

“Of course. You can just call m... No, I’m telling you I’m going to quit.”

She gave me a skeptical glance. I smiled and without any more words, ran towards the interview room.

Inside the interview room, the interview was still going on. When I entered, Seoyoung was explaining every detail of their album concept.

“Chief, one moment please.”

“Hmm?”

I made the most serious expression I could. Hyunjo stopped the interview momentarily and came out. I closed the door and told him exactly what Yoonjeong said a few steps away from the interview room. Hyunjo’s face instantly distorted.

“You sure? How did you know?”

I guess it was best to keep it anonymous?

“I heard it from an insider. This as well.”

I showed him the article I searched a while ago. Hyunjo who read the article in an instant glared at the interview room.

“Ugh, that trash reporting bastard really...!”

“Although it might not be the case, this time, isn’t it best to be prepared?”

“Of course. It’s too late if we wait until the article is released. I’m going to call PR team leader Park so you go and talk about nonsense and buy some time.”

I faithfully followed Hyunjo’s orders. When I went back inside, I talked about how the scent of the soap in the washroom was to my preference for 3 minutes.

Soon after, Hyunjo returned and the interview resumed. I didn’t know what he talked about with Team Leader Park, but he definitely was more careful with the answers. Every little detail about their current condition was answered by Hyunjo.

Eventually, Reporter Hwang Junggu concluded the interview.

“Thank you for your hard work. Now let’s go to the studio to take some pictures.”

“Mr. Reporter has worked hard as well. Please take good care of the article.”

“Yes, well…”

We went to the studio that was inside the building and took individual and group pictures that would go up with the article. Afterwards, the interview had completely ended.

As Hyunjo explained everything on our way back, the van became rowdy.

“We really could have been in big trouble! I was wondering why this oppa kept talking about the washroom.”

Seoyoung frowned as she grumbled.

“That reporter, his questions did seem a bit strange. Does he have some sort of grudge against us?”

“It’s nothing like that. He’s just trying to write a more provocative article to get more clicks. He doesn’t care what happens to you.”

“Scary, really.”

“But will we really be fine? Won’t the article be all weird?”

As LJ worried, Hyunjo nodded his head as if telling her to relax.

“Team Leader Park says she’s on friendly terms with their Entertainment Department Head. She said not to worry as it will be handled without any hiccups.”

“Really?”

“If that trash reporter hands in a strange article, they are going to reject him and tell him to write it all over again. He’s not the director or anything so what can he do when his superiors reject

his article?”

It was like I was seeing an aspect of a huge food chain.

“We will remember that reporter’s name and keep as far away from him as possible from now on, so don’t worry. But, Sunwoo.”

I was fixing my tangled seat belt when I turned my head.

“Yes?”

“Are you just incredibly lucky or is it something else?”

Of course, it was something else. Well, of course, this time, I really was lucky as well.

“You’ve been bringing good stuff since yesterday. How did you meet an insider on your way to the washroom?”

Seoyoung poked her head out as she seconded.

“Huh? Didn’t you meet Producer Joontae on your way to the washroom yesterday too?”

“Oh, that’s true.”

“Wow, wow! It looks like this oppa has a good aura. Let’s stick

closely with this oppa. Oppa, just pack your bags and come live with us!”

My face was hot.

I mean, it wasn’t like I was the one who said I wanted to, but why were their stares…

“Seoyoung, it’s time for your medicine. Stop talking nonsense and just sleep if you’re sick.”

LJ kicked Seoyoung’s seat.

“It’s not nonsense, there some truth behind it!”

“Truth?”

“My mom went to a skilled shaman not too long ago and asked when we would be successful. The fairy said that we would be very lucky at the end of this year. She said a snake will bring luck and to tightly grab hold of it to not lose it.”

Although Seoyoung made a fuss, the members had no reaction. Seoyoung quickly became glum and mumbled.

“It’s true… She said we need to grab the snake…”

But, I did have an idea about the snake...

“Aren’t you born on the year of the Snake?”

The traitor who was driving abruptly asked.

“I was born then. And since we’re both the same age... Right?”

“Yeah.”

Hyunjo laughed in the back.

“Stop it. Why are you guys joking around so much?”

“It’s not a joke.”

“What?! Then you both were really born on the year of the Snake?”

“Yes. 1989, the year of the Snake.”

“Oh my god.”

The back was silent for a few seconds before becoming noisy.

“Euah, creeeeepy...!”

I silently rubbed my shoulders as well.

Perhaps this foresight ability was more common than I thought?

We met with the staff of Next K-Star at night.

Since it was an expensive beef restaurant, I thought the staff had a large budget, but it turned out the first bill would be paid by W&U. I heard it was incredibly high quality, but because of constantly pouring and drinking alcohol, I didn't get the chance to truly savor it.

Fortunately, the atmosphere was very good the whole time. It looked like the members left a good impression on the staff. And they seemed to have shown off their unique personalities.

The meeting that started at the beef restaurant continued on to the second and third place and we finally ended past 3 a.m. After seeing off the completely drunk producers and writers, we once again got on the van.

The traitor who protected his liver while Hyunjo and I were constantly receiving drinks took the driver's seat. After we dropped off the yawning girls at their residence, there were three people remaining like yesterday.

Wow, that was yesterday... It felt like a month.

Now that the long day was over, all that was left was to rest at home.

“You guys worked hard today as well. Tired, right?”

Hyunjo talked with a slur.

“Quickly go home and sleep and eat something good in the morning.”

Was this déjà vu?

“Come to work by 7. We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

I didn’t make the same stupid mistake of repeating his words. Only...

“Chief. Could I just sleep at the company?”

“Me too...”

“Really? I’m going to sleep there too. Then let’s go together! The sleeping quarters at the company are pretty good.”

I laughed as I followed Hyunjo.

Damn, I need to escape from here as soon as possible.

Chapter 18: If You Don't Step, You Get Stepped On (1)

It felt like someone had grabbed my hair and was dragging me around.

That was how it felt as each day passed by hectically.

Outside the company, the photoshoot for Next K-Star's poster, teaser video shoot and individual profile video shoots all started at the same time.

It was the process of getting rid of everything that had Lemon Girls and replacing it with Neptune. The day was so packed that the staff and ourselves felt like we were going to die.

In the company, it was meeting after meeting after meeting. From the PR team that I had met before to Neptune's vocal trainer, choreographer and stylists... I think I had meetings with half the employees within a few days. I had already given up on trying to remember all their names.

During lunch and dinner time, I followed Hyunjo to his external meetings. Once our appearance on Next K-Star was guaranteed, other places started to bite.

That was why at lunch we would eat with some cable program's producer, at dinner eat with an employee of an event agency and drink with reporters...

I realized the reason why managers would get into accidents by falling asleep while driving. This kind of schedule was something that could not be handled with a human body.

I couldn’t go home yesterday as well. In the few days since I started working at W&U, I was starting to become a poltergeist in the company. A movie I was really looking forward to was released, but I haven’t had the chance to go see it.

Did this make sense?

However, they said that this was only a decent amount of work. They said once Neptune becomes a hit and has nationwide schedules and international ones as well, I would miss these days... That was what Hyunjo told me.

A bastard even a grim reaper wouldn’t take. To call that support...

If you’re going to give me this much work, give me life risk pay! I might actually die!

“Gasp!”

I was so agitated; I was about to swallow my toothpaste.

Did I already get anger management issues...

I spit out the toothpaste and rinsed my mouth. I was deathly exhausted. My face reflected on the mirror had sunken to about half in a few days.

I didn't care who, I just wanted someone to hit me. So I could rest at the hospital.

I was resting for a bit with my hands on the sink when I heard a noise from the entrance of the washroom.

"How far are you going to follow me for? Are you going to follow me into the washroom?"

"Hyung, ah, hyung...!"

Two men entered the washroom. One had a normal appearance while the other... The man who looked great even the washroom, Sung Dowon.

The man hesitated before telling Dowon.

"Just look at the synopsis, hyung."

"Sigh... Stop pestering me."

"I already read it and the synopsis is really good. Rumors have spread and there are already a bunch of people who want it. If

hyung says he's not going to do it, I bet someone will probably snatch it right away? Hyung, the director said if you agree, he can sign the contract for $7, 000 per episode."

"Even so, I am not going to do any more dramas. It's exhausting on my body and there are too many cases where the story goes astray."

"This project is 100% written in advanced. That's why I am telling hyung to do it. There's even a Swiss on-site shoot. Hyung, you said you wanted to go on a trip to Switzerland."

"Sigh... Okay. I get it so give me the synopsis. I'll read it once."

How envious. I envied that manager the most.

"Hello."

Sung Dowon looked straight at me and greeted me. I clenched the hand that was holding my toothbrush.

"Yes, hello."

"You look so tired. You should take care of your health while you work."

"Ah... Thank you."

He even had a great personality along with his looks. He has it all. Has it all.

When I was admiring Sung Dowon, his manager looked at me with an unhappy expression. Eventually, I left as if I was getting kicked out.

I wanted to see him more... No, it was a good thing. If I was there any longer, I might have grabbed Dowon and asked when he was going to ask me to be his manager.

He said, ‘I wish Mr. Sunwoo could be my manager.’

Then did that mean I was going to replace that manager? Or work under him?

Any way was fine, I just hoped that day would come soon. It must be coming. It was a conversation about how I helped Sung Dowon when he was facing an incident that could end his acting career.

Although I felt bad for Dowon, since it was going to happen, I wished it would happen soon.

I will help you with all my strength, so, please.

I thought that being able to see the future was a cheat skill that gave me the answers to all of my life’s problems, but since I only knew the answer and not the problem-solving process, it was really frustrating.

However, if it was certain I was going to be Sung Dowon's manager in the future, I would be able to endure the current trial as though it was a passing typhoon.

When I entered the office, the traitor was already ready and talking to other employees with a smile.

"Oh, you came?"

Don't smile, you jerk.

My body was exhausted, but whenever I see the traitor, even my mind felt like it was taking a hit.

"We're leaving in 5 minutes. Since it's our first recording, he said we have to go early and meet with the staff."

"Where's chief?"

"He said he had someone to call so he went down first."

On our way to the elevator, I saw a whiteboard hanging on the wall. It was the various W&U's celebrities' schedules. On today's date, it had 'Neptune-Next K-Star Filming'. I was really happy when I wrote that at that time...

We met up with Hyunjo and drove the van to Neptune's

residence. I was the driver. Since we had to drive multiple times a day, I couldn't just leave driving all to the traitor. So I eventually built up my courage to drive and when I did, it really wasn't all that bad.

"Hello!"

"Yeah, did you all have good dreams last night?"

"We practiced all night!"

Even though it was morning, all the Neptune members were filled with energy. And although they tried to calm themselves down, it was cute to see how their expectations for their first filming were clearly visible.

We definitely were busy together, but why was it while I was in this condition, the girls' faces looked even better. They adapted to their schedule and once they learned that the first theme was singing, they even put more effort into their vocal training.

Just what was their secret? Was this the power of supervision?

After getting their makeup and hair done at the shop, we made our way to the film studio. I listened to the conversation at the back while driving. Hyunjo grabbed the girls' attentions and was giving them advice.

"When you do the interview, think wisely before answering. You

don’t need to rush to answer, so pick and choose your words carefully. Have you guys watched all the programs Producer Joontae has directed?”

“Of course.”

“They don’t just say it’s the devil’s editing process for no reason. When producers are editing the footage, they don’t care what intentions you had during the interview. They only care about the text. There are even some that ignore the context and just string various words together.”

“We know. We printed out sample interview questions and practiced with each other.”

“Good. I’m not worried about Taehee. Seoyoung and LJ, you guys make mistakes when you flustered so be careful and don’t lose your tempers. And… Songha, you’re the one I’m the most worried about.”

Hyunjo shook his head. When I saw Songha through the rear-view mirror, her blinking eyes showed that she couldn’t accept it. Even I, who was only around for a few days, could understand what Hyunjo was worried about.

“Why me?”

“You don’t express yourself a lot and your straightforward words could easily be misinterpreted. Even your words just now, you

asked because you were curious, but if it edited with a weird timing, it could make you look bad.”

“...Me?”

“What’s the point. Your face will be enough so just stick close to your unnis[1] with your mouth closed. I’m also going to keep a careful watch, but you girls need to be careful as well. And when you girls are doing a group interview, try to make it so that it doesn’t get to Songha.”

“Okay. Don’t worry too much, oppa.”

“Sunwoo and Gunyoung. You guys keep an eye out for the girls too.”

“Yes.”

I wasn’t the type to watch a lot of entertainment programs so when I went to investigate them I was surprised. The Devil’s editing process was much more intense than back when I watched these programs.

It looked like they would edit aggressively and purposely create controversy. It even looked like they would plan to make one of the cast get insulted to increase the popularity of the program.

Because of this, there were a few that went on interviews crying

while saying that they were the sacrificial lambs of the Devil's editing process and also, some who took to social media to fire shots at the producers.

I hoped that it wouldn't happen to Neptune.

I didn't know if they received insults due to the aggressive article or if there was something else. I hoped that I could find some hints from the future, but there were no signs of that happening.

It was like it was teasing me, keeping me hanging.

Not much time had passed when we arrived at the Next K-Star studio. In the concert hall-sized studio, the staff were installing all the cameras, light and audio equipment and were busy making sure everything was working.

Since we came early for a preliminary interview, the other idol groups hadn't arrived yet.

We made our rounds of greeting and were led straight to the interview room. Inside the room, two cameras and lights were installed and some staff, as well as Producer Joontae and a writer, were present.

While the members were putting on their mics, we talked with the producer and the writer. To be exact, Hyunjo was the one talking while Gunyoung and I stood beside him.

“Please take good care of us, Mr. Producer.”

“Why does everyone ask me to take care of them when they come for interviews? If you compared my program to others, I’m not that aggressive. It’s pretty much a documentary.”

Like hell it is.

And quickly Producer Joontae proved his words were false. He would first set them at ease by asking questions like, ‘What were your thoughts on participating in Next K-Star,’ ‘are you confident in getting a high score,’ ‘out of the other seven teams, who would you consider your rivals,’ and then he suddenly handed out a piece of paper.

“What does Neptune think the final ranking would be? From first to last, you just need to write down a rank for each team and why.”

“Wow… We need to write the reason as well?”

“Just a simple reason. It’s going to be anonymous so don’t worry.”

“Is this really anonymous? You’re not going to announce it as Nept— team or —Tune team, right?”

“Hahaha. We will ensure your anonymity. We are going to exclude the names and only announce the reasons. Just letting you

know, five out of the seven chose Neptune as last place.”

Seoyoung who relaxed the mood with her charming mannerisms stiffened. Although she was able to quickly settle herself down once Taehee nudged her arm, it was probably caught on camera.

“I’ll read you just a few. ‘Neptune is a group with only looks. Without that, I don’t know,’ ‘They are participating not because of their potential, but because of their company’s influence,’ ‘They look like a group that appeals through looks rather than skills.’ Something like that. How are they?”

I was worried they might agree, fortunately, they were stronger than I thought.

This time, Taehee answered with a calm voice instead of Seoyoung.

“Just like how other groups think, not many viewers will have high expectations for us. In some ways, it’s good. A story is fun when it has a twist. Since we are able to leave a big impression solely through our efforts, I like to believe we received a chance that other teams didn’t.”

I didn’t know because she didn’t talk much, but she was really good at talking.

Because she looked confident and cool without trying, she looked trustworthy in the interview. Like a generous type? I understood

why Hyunjo wasn't worried about Taehee.

But, that's that. Although they said it was anonymous, their words were harsher than I thought.

Since they had to consider the images of the idols, I thought they would be easier than the survival audition programs with regular people. If it was like this, it was going to be tough.

When I looked to the side, Hyunjo's expression wasn't good.

"Jung Sunwoo."

"Yes?"

"Go to the washroom."

What in the world was he talking about?

"Go to the washroom?"

"Something good happened to you when you went to the washroom. Twice. Just in case, go to the washroom before they start filming."

"...Are you serious?"

“I am grasping at straws right now.”

I was half-forcefully chased out of the interview room.

Well, I was going since he told me to, but I was at a loss for words...

I acted like I was deep in thought and walked around the entrance of the washroom two or three times, but nothing happened. There continued to be nothing from my foresight ability.

Damn it, let’s give up.

Since I was at the washroom, I decided to do my business. After washing my hands, I walked towards the interview room.

“Hey.”

At first, I didn’t realize that it was meant for me, but I stopped when I heard the next words.

“Hey, Neptune’s manager!”

When I turned around the man I saw previously, Lemon Girls’ manager, was swaggering towards me.

Since it was quite for a few days, I had forgotten about it, but he really did come.

“I came to see the faces of the terrible girl group that W&U planted in… when I saw someone familiar walking around. You’re that asshole from before, right?”

To come all the way here to fight with me, did this person have too much time on his hands?

“You’re that asshole that was watching in front of the washroom. Did you stumble in front of Producer Joontae and push your group? I saw the articles the next day, you must have been really busy that night, huh? Huh? Just where did this fucking bastard with no ethics come from? Did they teach you that in W&U?”

I was a bit surprised since it had been so long since I had seen someone provoking me so publicly.

When I looked at my surroundings, the only people present were that man and myself.

I wasn’t confident in fighting… But that didn’t mean I should obediently turn the other cheek when I was already sworn at.

“I don’t think that I did anything to get sworn at.”

“What, you asshole?”

The Lemon Girls' manager tapped my chest.

"Just what did you say to me? Tell me again."

"It wasn't like I bribed Producer Joontae to replace Lemon Girls with Neptune, I only took the chance since it was there... When I think about it again, I don't think I did anything that deserved getting sworn at."

"What, you asshole?"

I said it again since you asked me to, you asshole.

"Why are you letting out your frustrations on a stranger?"

"Fuck, I was already pissed, but you pissed me off, even more, asshole. You want to get hit, do you? Huh? Are you going crazy to get hit?"

His figure looked even bigger now that I was in danger. With those thick arms and rock-like fists, it would probably hurt if I got hit.

Maybe... Just maybe, I might be hospitalized...

"Hit me, then."

“What?”

“Hit me. So I can get hospitalized and get interviewed by a reporter.”

I’ll need to call Reporter Park Yoojeong.

“Just where did this crazy asshole come from?”

Notes:

1] Unni is what a younger female would call an older female

Chapter 19: If You Don't Step, You Get Stepped On (2)

Getting hospitalized after fainting from exhaustion or hospitalized after getting hit and breaking some bones, they were the same. Actually, getting hospitalized after getting hit would be better since then I could rest easy and not care about what other people thought. And get compensation.

"Fuck, do you think you'll be able to continue to work like this?"

"Yeah. I think so."

That felt good, but those weren't my words.

When I turned around, Hyunjo was walking towards us.

"He's going to continue to work fine, so you just care about your own future. Why are you here picking a fight with him, when you're the one who couldn't do his fucking job? Did he get that girl from Lemon Girls drunk and call the cops on her?"

"No... Fuck, but still it's unfair."

"What a funny bastard. What's unfair? There's a chance right in front of your eyes, would you let it go? Then that bastard's the idiot. Stop picking a fight with someone's who doing his job and leave."

Whoa… How did all that come from such a small body?

Hyunjo’s body was exactly half the size of Lemon Girls’ manager. It looked like both his mind and body would break after a hit and he would be carried off on a stretcher. But, it was Lemon Girls’ manager who was pressured by Hyunjo’s spirit.

Even though Lemon Girls’ manager was panting heavily unable control his anger, he never swung his fists.

Was the comment about the reporter effective?

Anyways, we returned to the interview room. Behind us, the manager was still coldly glaring at us. Did we just add fuel to the fire… I didn’t think it would end just like this.

“I feel like he’s going to wear a hole in the back of my head.”

“Ignore him.”

“You don’t think he’ll attack us on our way home, do you?”

“Don’t worry. You don’t even go home these days.”

Thaaanks.

“But are you good at fighting?”

Hyunjo suddenly asked.

“Or good at sports? Like boxing?”

“No. I am not friendly with sports.”

“Then is your family incredibly rich? If you get hit once, will ten lawyers gather around you?”

“Sorry? There’s nothing like that.”

“Then just what were you thinking provoking him like that? His body was like a boar.”

“I can’t just be put down like that. That would be embarrassing.”

“You have more guts than I thought. Still, pick your opponents carefully from now on. If you care about getting embarrassed, something really might break.”

He continued to nag for a while before adding.

“You can’t be hospitalized. You know we’re busy, right?”

“Yes… I do.”

My impression of him was good just a while ago, but he really was the Devil.

Hyunjo continued after briefly looking behind us.

“Especially don’t get involved with him. He doesn’t come from a good crowd.”

“I heard that as well. That rumors about him weren’t good…”

“It’s not just him, even his superiors are the same. Pure Star Entertainment itself is a company with plenty of dirty rumors. Nothing good will happen if you involve yourself with them, so it’s best to avoid them.”

I suddenly stopped after nodding.

“Was that manager just now from Pure Star Entertainment?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know? Lemon Girls are Pure Star’s group.”

“The previous company Sung Dowon was in, that Pure Star?”

“That’s right. Dowon suffered so much from them that he left as soon as his contract ended. At that time, Dowon was pretty much the bread winner of that company so they clung to him for a renewal… That’s why there was some noise when he transferred to

our company.”

What was this?

I wasn’t expecting this, but the dots were connecting.

Just when I thought that, my vision went dark.

Finally!

If I could move, I would have cheered three times.

I was in the office I could probably draw with my eyes closed. My office twenty years from now.

Last time, in the future where I was sitting face to face with Dowon, the surroundings were hazy, but everything was clear this time. The situation was familiar. I was still sitting in the comfy chair and Director Park and Reporter Song were in front of me.

Wow, Director Park… Now that I saw her again, I was certain she was Reporter Park Yoojeong.

Although she had aged and her style has changed, her face was the same. But the fascinating thing was her face was definitely Reporter Park Yoojeong, but the feeling she gave off was completely different.

Was it because of her age? People could even change to this degree.

“However, chairman originally wanted to be assigned to an actor.”

Reporter Song opened her mouth.

The content, of course, as well as the voice and expression, I concentrated on everything I could hear, see and feel.

“When you were working with Neptune, didn’t you request to move to the actor team?”

“It wasn’t the right time to ask then. After I was hired, there was a huge incident within the actor team.”

Just a little, just a little more specifically…

I was anxiously straining my ears.

“An incident?”

“Sung Dowon’s sex scandal.”

That’s it!

I was elated as soon as Sung Dowon's name was mentioned. The reason that his acting career could have been over was because of this sex scandal!

Wait, but was that something that could end an actor's career? I could understand if he did drugs or gambled or received a DUI, but sex wasn't a crime. He would only lose a few of his fans from an incident like that.

Wasn't it abnormal for someone with that face, that body and that paycheck to be abstinent?

Was it not just a regular sex scandal? Did a video circulate?

"Ah, that really was a mess."

Director Park abruptly entered the conversation.

"A popular actor in his twenties, someone who was free of dating rumors, held a perverted sex party. Among them, there even was a married woman... Since a bomb like that exploded, at that time, it was an enormous scandal."

Oh, my god.

"Articles stating that woman was the wife of the president of a company who sponsored Dowon since the beginning or that Sung Dowon was a perverted sex addict started flooding in with a nonchalant attitude towards whether it was true or false. Well,

even I wrote a bunch of articles then too.”

“Then Director Park must have been met with backlash.”

My future self said with a smirk.

“Of course. Whew… It was war.”

Just what was this backlash and what did she mean by war?

I was so frustrated that my blood was about to flow in reverse when luckily Reporter Song asked.

“What do you mean by backlash?”

“About that scandal. An unknown man used a newspaper company and asked W&U and Song Dowon for a fortune. Adultery with a married woman, perverted sex, he said the public would rush to this topic and that if they wanted to quietly cover it up, they would have to pay him.”

“Ah…”

“That man had a picture.”

A picture?

“A picture?”

“Photo evidence. So that’s why W&U paid the man to shut his mouth, but eventually an article popped up. The fact that W&U tried to cover it with money and even that there was photo evidence. That’s why Sung Dowon’s image fell to the bottom in an instant.”

“Well, if that kind of scandal happened twenty years ago, it would have been huge.”

“It sure was. However, not long after the situation reversed.”

“Pardon?”

“The backlash started.”

“Jung Sunwoo!”

My mind instantly snapped back.

Hyunjo who was a few steps ahead of me called.

What? Was that it? It’s not like it was a shitty drama, did it really end like that?

Even a shitty drama would tell you when the next episode was,

but I didn't know when I would see this again.

Are you telling me to die of frustration?!

"You coming?"

"Yes. I'll go in in a sec."

"Sure. Come in once you're okay."

I exited the studio with a blank expression.

I paced in front of the studio for a long while to calm myself.

Good. Let's think optimistically.

If I didn't have my foresight ability, I wouldn't have known anything. However, now I knew that Sung Dowon will be caught in the worst sex scandal and that his image would drop to the floor. Also, although I didn't know why, that the situation would reverse.

When they said backlash, it would've meant that other circumstances came up as well, which meant that there was something that could reverse Sung Dowon's predicament.

And the anonymous man W&U made a deal with...

Why did Pure Star Entertainment make me feel uneasy?

Dowon definitely said that ‘he would have been caught in their trap.’

Although it was only a hunch, let’s think through it once.

Since Sung Dowon was pretty much the bread winner for Pure Star Entertainment, when he refused to renew his contract, they must have been very pissed. During the time they were grinding their teeth at W&U and Sung Dowon, their girl group, Lemon Girls, blew off a big chance after a big incident.

But, of all people, it was W&U’s Neptune who grabbed that chance, so Pure Star Entertainment must have been more pissed.

So as a way of saying fuck you, they planned a trap for Sung Dowon…

Something like that?

Since Sung Dowon was with Pure Star Entertainment since his debut, there was a high probability that they knew a lot about Sung Dowon’s personal life, even the finer details. Although I didn’t know how much of the sex scandal was true, they could have taken a picture that could be used against him later in secret.

Did they anonymously approach W&U because they didn't want to face them head on?

Or were they scared that Sung Dowon wouldn't suffer by himself and blab about them?

They said that even the fact they paid him was revealed to the public. They also knew that these kinds of backdoor deals would stain W&U and Sung Dowon's image even more and since they kept their anonymity, they could just sit back and enjoy the show.

Well, it was still only an assumption.

Chapter 20: If You Don't Step, You Get Stepped On (3)

After calming down my frustration, I started to find this situation interesting.

Someone was secretly planning a trap for Sung Dowon.

And W&U and Sung Dowon had no idea.

Could I say it felt like I was laying on my belly with my hands supporting my chin as a war scene was about to unfold? And with prior knowledge of which way the war would go.

Of course, the most interesting point was that unlike watching a movie, I could personally take part in this.

First, let's quietly wait until it begins. If I was to talk about it now, people would call me delusional.

Also, the future... I need to see that last scene.

It would be incredible if I knew all the details of this incident. Perhaps, I could even manipulate the board myself.

Let's focus on Neptune in the meantime.

When I organized my thoughts and returned to the interview room, Hyunjo gave me a happy welcome.

“How is your dizziness?”

“It’s fine now.”

“Let me know immediately if your body feels weak. I’ll feed you stamina foods. You’re not allowed to faint.”

… I would need to stay alive until then.

“Now, this is the last question.”

“Yes!”

The gloomy girls brightened up at Producer Joontae’s words. They were so energetic even after practicing all night, just how much torment did they go through?

“When I was interviewing Sugar Cats, I heard that Ms. Seoyoung was originally supposed to debut with them?”

As if it was an unwelcome topic, Seoyoung bit her lips.

“Ah… We were trainees in the same company.”

“Sugar Cats members seemed very sad to see you go to W&U?”

“Pardon?”

“Of course, they told me they understood even though they were sad. Although Sugar Cats’ company wasn’t small, compared to W&U, they are a bit… However, don’t you feel jealous that Sugar Cats you left have become more popular than Neptune? Do you ever regret your decision?”

A girl who betrayed her long-time colleagues to go to a bigger company but was jealous that they became more successful than her. It felt like they were trying to make her into that character. The amount of malicious comment that would immediately follow the broadcast, it was obvious.

When I looked to the side, I saw Hyunjo nervously shaking his leg.

Seoyoung tried to stay as calm as she could and said.

“First, I didn’t leave them.”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t know if it was because of my bad luck, but during my trainee days, my debut was canceled multiple times. I heard rumors that Sugar Cats would be separated without being able to debut, so when I got a call from W&U, I transferred. Even I was

surprised when they debuted as Sugar Cats.

“Ah... Is that so? Then was there a miscommunication with the company?”

“And I am envious of their popularity and I sincerely feel happy for them. However, I do not regret debuting as Neptune. Taehee unni and LJ, Songha, all the members are really great.”

Hyunjo gave an ‘OK’ sign with his fingers. And once the interview was over, he grabbed Producer Joontae and carefully asked.

“Mr. Producer. I ask that you do not distort Seoyoung’s past.”

“Although I might exaggerate for the viewers; I do not lie. I am not that cheap.”

You may not lie, but you probably won’t reveal the whole truth either.

Don’t tell me it was because of Seoyoung that Neptune got insulted...?

Since I only knew the future in snippets, it felt like I was getting more suspicious.

Once the preliminary interview was over, the youngest writer I

saw at the get-together led us to our waiting room. It seemed like other groups had arrived as I could see a few pretty and handsome young kids in the hallway.

“This is Neptune’s waiting room.”

The writer who stopped in front of the door avoided our eyes.

There were two names on the door. Neptune. And Sugar Cats.

Were these people joking?

“Sorry, there weren’t enough waiting rooms... You will only be using it together for today.”

Were there really not enough waiting rooms or did you want to see Neptune and Sugar Cats fight after pushing them into the same room?

“Well, if that’s the case, there’s nothing we can do.”

Hyunjo opened the door with a tired expression.

“Hello!”

“Hi, Seoyoung!”

Hmm?

The girls I saw during the music broadcast previously jumped up to greet us.

Just what were those exaggerated reactions?

Seoyoung looked like she was surprised as well as her greetings came late.

“Uh… Hi, guys.”

“We were so happy when we saw that Neptune was going to join. We were thinking about calling you, but decided to endure it since you were probably busy. We’ll see each other often from now on!”

That girl was the leader of Sugar Cats, I think? Was her name Han Saebyeol?

Her cute, round face and she had lots of charm like Seoyoung.

When I was wondering why they were overreacting, the youngest writer gave me the answer.

“There are cameras installed in the waiting rooms, so if you need to change please go to the changing rooms.”

Aha.

“Since we are just trying to record your natural behavior, you don’t need to care about the cameras.”

The youngest writer told us something even a child wouldn’t believe and left.

While many cameras were watching, Sugar Cats and Neptune introduced each other. They only discussed superficial details of what happened recently. After all the teams had arrived, we all went out to the hallway. Since we had to introduce ourselves before we started filming.

The hallway was already noisy with people introducing themselves. Since there were so many kids, it felt like I was at a student camp. The oldest here was 25. I think the youngest was 17?

These eight teams were chosen out of the tens that came out every year.

Put in a good way, they were rising stars, but even then, they were only at the bottom of the music industry food chain. Those who were thirsty for popularity.

Maybe because of this, there were many kids who didn’t act their age. On their face was a superficial smile, exaggerating how they didn’t have enough time to practice so they were worried about their score, while in secret they were comparing, guarding against,

jealous of and ignoring each other.

Although they were all about the same, there were still differences between them.

There were people surrounding those who had a bit of popularity, for example, Sugar Cats who were next to us, and those who were ignored like us. Only courtesy greetings went back and forth, no one wanted to stay and talk.

Since there wasn't a lot of time, they were gathering to those who would be of help to them, those who would be good contacts.

Pictures taken with them would result in a hotter topic and if they said they were friends with them, it would raise their standing.

So, those that looked like they would be successful.

On top of that, since Neptune joined late, they were treated as those who got a free ride. Even though they were all the same, it looked like they thought there was a difference as their eyes weren't friendly.

Well, it wasn't surprising.

Those papers with the reasons why Neptune was going to be last that Producer Joontae read to us. Just looking at those, I could tell that most the groups here didn't think well of Neptune.

Still, since it was different to personally experience it than hearing about it, the girls, Hyunjo and the traitor's expressions weren't good.

And I kept an expressionless face to not stand out...

If I was being honest, I found this situation quite funny.

Since I knew Neptune's next album would be successful.

Even if they were to compare everyone's popularity, it was like measuring acorns[1].

From my preliminary research, I knew that none of the teams placed even in the top 10 let alone first or runner-up.

I didn't know this, but getting first in a music broadcast was definitely not easy.

However, Neptune was going to take first place with their next album. When that happened, no one would describe them as unknown or a second-hand rookie group.

Although there were many one-hit wonders who would disappear without a trace since Director Park said 'Neptune's first hit song', there definitely was a second one.

Anyways, unless they constantly placed first in music broadcasts, Neptune would no longer be similar to them.

So in my position where I knew all that, I could only see their actions as laughable.

The more they disregarded and ignored Neptune, I was expectantly waiting to see their reactions when their positions reversed.

“Huhuhu.”

“Just what is so funny, oppa? I feel like I just entered the enemy camp.”

Seoyoung poked my back and whispered.

“It’s just interesting.”

“What is?”

“People’s actions.”

“...I say this oppa is quite strange sometime.”

Though there were times when I felt so frustrated I could die, my foresight ability was definitely good.

Even though it was the first filming, the judges didn't come. The staff said that this was their first meeting before the first mission and pushed them all onto the stage. Like a battle under the cover of introductions and questions. After that was done, there were more individual interviews with the staff.

Since we were constantly nervous, the girls and even us managers were getting tired out.

Then we received our first mission. It was a group singing mission where each team would have to perform one of their songs in front of four judges, a mc who used to be a solo artist, a former girl group leader, a current producer and a current songwriter.

I thought they would at least play the MR, I mean the instrumentals, but when they said to perform without any music, all the teams panicked. They said something about clearly hearing their sense of rhythm and beats and their singing ability.

Although the risks were high, it was a mission with a lot to gain. Anyways, it was a chance to properly promote their best song. If the viewers liked the song without the instrumentals, then there were going to be an increase of people who would find and listen to it in stores.

However, if they failed, that song would forever remain as a dark splotch in their past.

As soon as their first filming was finished, the girls didn't head

home, but shut themselves in the company's practice room. Their drive was incredible. They even missed dinner, so I bought them some food.

And I was on my way to the office once again.

I met with two people, one with a face I was a bit familiar with and the other with a face I knew very well.

It was Son Chaeyeong and her manager who I saw a few days ago at the PR team meeting, Chief Jo.

The two were sitting in the fourth-floor lounge. Chief Jo was talking passionately while holding a stack of A4 papers in each hand and Son Chaeyeong wore sunglasses and looked like she was bored of listening to him.

It was really Son Chaeyeong. The one who I had only seen on TV and in the theaters, the one who was synonymous with innocence, Son Chaeyeong.

Should I introduce myself?

While I was worrying over the decision, Chief Jo suddenly gestured with his hand.

"Team 3 Lucky Charm!"

“…Me?”

“Yeah, you. Come here and talk.”

Did my face show that I was worrying whether to introduce myself or not?

When I approached them with a bashful expression, Chief Jo handed me both stacks of A4 papers.

What was this? It was quite thick.

When I looked at the cover, there was a title written on each.

<20-part miniseries – Time Slip>

<16-part miniseries – Mermaid out of Water>

Don’t tell me these were drama synopses?

I quickly received them and flipped through a few pages, they were synopses. Unreleased, hot-off-the-press synopses to boot. On the front page, there was the title and the names of the director and writer. A detailed outline, the descriptions of characters and a summary were well organized afterwards.

I wanted to read them in detail. No, I wanted them.

But why did he show these to me?

“One is PBS, Monday-Tuesday, the other is IBC, Wednesday-Thursday. Since the broadcasting periods are the same, we can only choose one out of the two, but both have trustworthy writers and directors and the payments are the same. If we found out later that the one we threw got higher ratings than the one we chose, we’ll go crazy. So it’s a troublesome decision, right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

This was why it was important for managers and actors to have a discerning eye and luck. There were some actors who unluckily passed up on hit projects and others who took up roles they weren’t supposed to play and rose to stardom.

Since there was no way to know which drama would be a hit and which one would flunk, there was no way they wouldn’t be troubled when picking out their projects.

“I am just asking you as if I was getting my fortune read by a tarot card reader. So don’t feel any pressure and just pick one.”

“Sorry?”

“Which one do you think is going to be more successful?”

Notes:

1] measuring acorns means that it was pointless as the results are insignificant

Chapter 21: Which Drama Will Be A Hit? (1)

I read each synopsis one after the other. My foresight ability won't happen at this great timing, would it?

I flipped through a few pages and sure enough, there was nothing. Damn it. It was so sad that I couldn't use my ability whenever I wanted to.

But I still held onto hope and asked Chief Jo.

"Can I tell you after I fully read both of them?"

"Haha, this guy's full of confidence. Even if I tell others to choose without worry, they would try to avoid it in case the one they chose failed... Sure, sit here and read. We have a meeting with the chairman in an hour anyways."

I immediately sat down and opened the synopses.

First, 'Time Slip'.

It was an action thriller where a profiler returns to the past after getting murdered by the serial killer he was after.

The female lead was a strong officer. Her role would be similar to that of a sidekick of the male lead. Romance was faint, but the character was a proactive genius, so when I looked at the synopsis,

it was a really appealing.

And ‘Mermaid out of Water’ was a popular romantic comedy webtoon[1].

A mermaid who came out to search for a fabulous prince falls in love with a sassy 2nd generation jaebeol[2]. It was an obvious story, but would work well.

On top of that, the female lead that Son Chaeyeong would play was a lovely 3-dimensional character.

Unlike the mermaid story, written by Hans Anderson, where the mermaid chose to dissolve into foam because she couldn’t bring herself to hurt the prince, the female lead was a reckless and ingenious character who would even resort to stalking to get the male lead.

When I just looked at the synopses, both were good. They put a lot of effort in the synopses.

Since they had to bring investments and hire the cast, they probably exaggerated a few places, but the writer and director had several box office hits so I didn’t really worry about it being anticlimactic.

If we looked at just the synopses, even if they didn’t do well, they would probably rank in the middle.

The problem was both were good.

Time Slip was a concept drama targeted at a younger audience, it seemed like it would receive comments about being a well-made drama. Honestly, even if this did worse, if the story was good then it wasn't something that would be a flaw in one's filmography.

Mermaid out of Water was something that could appeal to a broader range of ages, even to people in their thirties and forties. And since it was a romantic comedy drama, the female lead would be the focus. Also, the original webtoon was popular, so it would have quite the following.

I could understand why Son Chaeyeong and Chief Jo were troubled. They couldn't do both so they had to choose one, but that decision was really tough.

Which one would do better?

"How is it? Is there one that catches your eye?"

Son Chaeyeong asked, taking off her sunglasses.

The moment I met her brown eyes, the world shook.

It was the future!

No, it was another future to be exact. It was not the clear future

with Director Park and Reporter Song, but a faulty future like the hazy one I saw with Sung Dowon.

The dizzier my vision was, the more I had to concentrate.

Where was this? Just where was I now?

My future self was using chopsticks. My mouth and throat were warm. Okay, I am in the middle of eating. It was a bit hazy, I could make out napkins, the kalguksu[3] bowl with a business name on it, side dishes and a glass of water on the table.

It was a restaurant.

I was eating kalguksu with the male-female pair sitting in front of me.

Huh?

Their faces were familiar... The young PR team employees. Since they were sociable people, we would catch up with each other during meetings, but we haven't ever eaten together.

The female employee's hair was similar to how I remembered it. Was it not the distant future?

They were both wearing long sleeved shirts and behind them, a not-so-thick coat was hung on the chair. It looked like it was spring

or fall.

Since it was too thin to wear these days, was it spring next year? Or next fall?

Ah, my eyes felt like they were going to pop out. It felt like I was looking at a Magic Eye image.

If he was to look at his phone, I would be able to see the date, but my future self was looking at the kalguksu bowl and using his chopsticks. Meanwhile, the kalguksu was delicious.

“I’m so tired I could die; I can’t even sleep.”

The female PR team employee said with an irritated voice. I looked up and asked.

“Why? What happened?”

“Son Chaeyeong keeps giving me a hard time. She whines, telling us to take down the power blogger who criticized that they screwed up the drama, whines, telling us to take down the article saying that her drama was picked as the worst drama for the first quarter of 2016. Erase this, sue him... Is the PR team god? Were those things we could do just because we wanted to? If I could do all that, why would I be working here? I’d go to the Blue House[4].

So Son Chaeyeong’s drama flunked!

If it was the first quarter of 2016, it was the right time. If they signed the contract now and started filming, the drama should finish by the end of the first quarter.

Just what did she pick that failed? Even if both weren't successful, it wasn't to the point of losing everything.

"How are we supposed to stop people from saying the drama failed when it did."

The male employee dropped his chopsticks and added in.

"That's my point. We could have at least put it nicely if it failed moderately. How can we do anything with a drama that has the lowest viewership ratings of 3%?"

What? 3%?

The viewership ratings of public network dramas did drop significantly now that cable and general cable networks were creating more diverse dramas. These days, 20% was considered a big success while 10% was average.

However, no matter how much the world has changed, for a public network drama to get 3% was a bit...

No, so which one was it!

I was anxious. If it suddenly stopped here, I would really…

“When we looked at the synopsis, it was quite good. Mr. Sunwoo saw it too, correct?”

“I also saw the synopsis and thought it would at least be average.”

Right. I did think that both would at least get average ratings.

The female employee sighed and said.

“The script was good in the beginning as well. Up until the 3rd episode, the ratings were going up, but those hardcore fans of the original screwed it up.”

Original!

I relaxed. If it was the one with an original, it would be Mermaid out of Water.

“It’s because those hardcore fans were overusing their power by saying things like ‘you didn’t do the original justice,’ ‘it’s meh,’ everywhere. It was when the production, director and writer decided to apply all those views by rewriting the script three times, things hit the fan. They should have just ignored them and continued, but they were influenced by them.”

“The writer’s mind turned to powder. She even got threats in the mail.”

“Sigh... If we knew this was going to happen, we would have chosen the other one.”

Yeah, I guess I’ll tell them to do Time Slip.

“Hey. Son Chaeyeong picked between Mermaid out of Water and Time Slip.”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“Why did she bother? When they were both going to fail.”

What?

“Time Slip started out good, really... If only the director didn’t cheat on his wife with the writer.”

What’d you say?

“Because of that, his wife came to the studio and made a mess, the director and writer were replaced and then they plastered it as a thriller and reduced the episodes to half. That is a failed drama that will last forever.”

What kind of situation was this?

They were deciding between the two, but they both failed?

Could they really be that unlucky? No, was it better for both of them to fail than regretting the decision after Time Slip became a success?

My future self thirstily drank the Kalguksu soup and said.

“I guess this is why we can’t choose from just looking at the synopses.”

“That’s what I’m saying. You have to open up the lid to know. Just look at the success on the cable network that Writer Hong Jumi wrote. Everyone who read her synopsis said it was childish and boring.”

A successful project?

My ears tingled. I nailed the words the female employee said into my head.

Writer Hong Jumi, cable network, everyone said it was childish and boring after reading the synopsis.

“You really had to read the script for that one. This was why

dramas depend on the writer's performance."

"Thanks to her, the cast got lucky. Because it was even a success in China, the lead and supporting actors became stars overnight."

"There were even articles stating that they had difficulty finding the cast for the new writer. Even we got contacted about it. We had to give it up because of scheduling issues. Sigh, we had to bite that one..."

"Did we know that would be such a success? Don't think about. If you do, you're only going to regret it even more."

"The one we thought would be a hit flunked and the one we thought was bad became a success. I wish someone would tell me that a certain one would be a success. Do I have to get a fortune-teller to pick one..."

"Excuse me?"

The hazy surrounding became clear.

In front of me was Son Chaeyeong looking at me.

"Was there one that caught your attention? Out of the two."

I looked at the synopses in my hands.

Time Slip and Mermaid out of Water.

Both failed... 3%...

How could I say this in a way I would be considered less crazy?

If I told them both weren't good, then they'd assume my judgment was bad. Honestly, the synopses were really good. And these people who were more experienced at this knew that.

If I told them as if I was a prophet that the director of Time Slip cheated on his wife for the writer so it will fail and the writer for Mermaid out of Water was so influenced by the hardcore fans of the original that she rewrote the script three times and failed, it felt like I was digging my own grave so I felt uncomfortable.

And to let them pick a drama even though I knew both would fail was a waste of my information and as a fan of Son Chaeyeong, it was a bit sad.

I readied my heart and opened my mouth.

Notes:

1] sort of like manga, but on the internet and no pages, just scroll down

2] a lot of big conglomerates in Korea are family run. So you can just think of it was a man with filthy rich parents

3] Kalguksu – literal meaning is knife noodle

4] Korean equivalent of the White House

Chapter 22: Which Drama Will Be A Hit? (2)

“Both the synopses are very interesting.”

Chief Jo nodded his head as if it was obvious.

“Right? You have a good eye. If there was just one that was really good, we could have just chosen that one, but since both are equally good, it’s troublesome.”

Well, they both would equally fail.

“I am a bit cautious to tell you this…”

I gulped down my saliva.

If we didn’t consider that I knew the future, I was a new employee that has been around for less than a month and they were long time experts that had lots of experience with dramas and movies. I really needed to explain myself carefully.

Good. Let’s try my best to convince them.

“Both have really good synopses, but there are some parts that concern me…”

“Oppa, just who is this?”

Son Chaeyeong cut me off and asked Chief Jo.

“Huh?”

“He says there’s a part that concerns him. Just what kind of person is he that I have to listen to him pour cold water on my project I haven’t even started? Whose manager is he?”

“Neptune’s manager.”

“Neptune?”

Son Chaeyeong’s expression immediately grew worse.

“They aren’t actors, but singers. Idols. And I know their manager and this person isn’t him?”

“… He’s a new recruit that just started.”

“New recruit?!”

She crossed her arms and laughed as though she was dumbfounded.

“What knowledge would a new recruit have for you to bring him here? Are your senses deteriorating? Just listen to what he’s

saying.”

“The truth is…”

This time, Chief Jo cut me off.

“He hit the jackpot as soon as he started working and has become Management Team 3’s Lucky Charm. So I wondered if there really was something like beginner’s luck and asked him. All for you…”

“Tell him to stop pouring cold water on my projects and to screw off. So annoying, really.”

Ah…

The person synonymous with innocence turned to dust and scattered.

I knew that a big part of an actor’s image was made up. But to be told to screw off from an actress who I thought was so good that I went to see her movie three times at the theaters… It was quite shocking.

“You, go.”

Before I could recover from the shock, Chief Jo tapped my arm.

“I asked you to pick one out of the two, but why did you have to overrate yourself and piss her off?”

“… Then I’ll take my leave.”

I stopped myself from speaking anymore and got up.

Just do what you want.

Mermaid out of Water? I don’t care if that fails or not.

After being told to screw off and hearing that I was overrating myself, I had no mind or loyalty to convince them any further.

I didn’t go straight to the office but came back outside. Then I went to the coffee shop, bought some coffee and made my way to the fifth floor.

Until then I kept pondering.

Although it was already spilled milk, as long as I had this ability, these incidents would constantly come up.

Did I say it wrong? Was my method wrong? Then how should I have done it?

The elevator doors opened to reveal a refined hallway. On each

side, the walls were filled with frames. They were the pictures of all the celebrities in W&U.

Son Chaeyeong with a bright smile, Song Dowon in the water gazing into the distance, among other countless actors that made up W&U.

There was even a frame with Neptune. An album cover with the now familiar faces clung together smiling. I stopped my steps in front of that frame before once again moving at a quick pace.

The PR team office was at the end of the hallway.

When I looked inside, I could see familiar faces between the partitions.

The two people I ate kalguksu with in the future. The female and male employee were sitting next to each other while typing on their keyboards. And behind them was Team Leader Park whose disheveled hair indicated something wasn't going smoothly.

I quietly placed a cup of coffee next to them.

"Hello. Have some coffee."

"Huh?! What is this? Why coffee all of a sudden?"

"I was just craving for coffee, what luck!"

Like I expected, their reactions were intense.

“I brought it here because I had a favor to ask you.”

Team Leader Park took her coffee and poked my back.

“I heard that you heard a few words from Son Chaeyeong just now? Is it about that?”

“How did you… Ah, this was the PR Team.”

“That’s right.”

“First, sit here.”

The male employee brought out a chair and sat me down, then massaged my shoulders as if giving me his support.

“Was it shocking? Son Chaeyeong was a child actress.”

As if he was cautious of his surroundings, he lowered his voice.

“She didn’t really have a time when she was unknown and since she was young, everyone around her spoiled her. That’s why her personality is like that.”

“She thinks she’s the best in the world and thinks her words are everything.”

The female employee complained. It seemed like the two had a lot built up. As soon as they started talking, Team Leader Park waved her hand and ended the conversation.

“Stop chatting, this is a company.”

She told me as well.

“Don’t go around talking bad about Son Chaeyeong just because you’re mad. Since she still is our actress.”

“Yes.”

I never had that thought. Since she was going to fail her drama soon anyways.

Besides that, I was more interested in something else.

“Team Leader Park. Would I be able to get a synopsis?”

“What? That’s your favor?”

“Yes.”

“Which one is it? What’s the title?”

“I don’t know the title, but it was written by a new writer, Hong Jumi. It’s from a cable network.”

“Cable?”

Team Leader Park tilted her head as if she had heard something strange.

“I heard that you had some concerns about the good synopses Son Chaeyeong had, why are you suddenly looking for a cable synopsis?”

Since it was a drama that would later become a nationwide hit, even becoming a huge success in China, and all the lead and supporting actors got their lucky break.

What Son Chaeyeong had was something that only looked good on the outside.

“Let me ask you first. Just what concerns did you have about the synopses? I read them and found both were good.”

I wondered what I would say before opening my mouth. Half sighing, half speaking.

I probably wouldn’t be told to screw off here.

“The synopses were good… But, I heard some bad rumors about the director and writer. That they had something.”

“What? What was it? I haven’t heard anything? Is there a tabloid circulating?”

As soon as Team Leader Park asked with a confused expression, the two employees quickly searched the internet. Writer, director, among other things, but obviously there would be no results.

That was probably right. Since it said that it exploded during the filming.

“Who did you hear it from?”

“It’s hard to say, but it’s reliable information. I was worried that that might badly influence their next project.”

“Okay. Then what about Mermaid out of Water?”

“There are so many fans of the original work and they are hardcore, too. I was worried that the drama would be influenced by them and lose its direction. The fans are quite fixed on who they want to be cast. They might ignore Son Chaeyeong’s acting ability and unreservedly insult her by saying that she doesn’t fit well with the character and that she isn’t the one they wanted for the character. Since there have been many cases where that happened. There have even been cases where the fans turned their backs and

the cast fell through.”

I thoroughly explained to make Team Leader Park and the employees understand.

Of course, I excluded the part about seeing it all in the future to avoid being taken as a mental patient.

Team Leader Park stared at me and laughed.

“You’re the type that constantly worries, right?”

“Me?”

“Of course, you can be worried. What do I do if there really is something going on with the director and writer of Time Slip and it affects the series? What do I do if the original fans of Mermaid out of Water abandon us? It’s fine to worry about that. But you can’t succeed if you’re afraid of failure. We’ll look into Time Slip. But why are you worrying about Mermaid out of Water? No one knows what will happen in the future.”

If I die, the cause would be frustration.

Jung Sunwoo. 27 years old. Died of frustration.

“The more fans the original has, the greater affect promotions will have and the fans could even be the driving force for the

viewership ratings.”

Was this how the barber felt when he yelled that the emperor’s ears were donkey ears[1]?

At first, I sighed, but after I cleared my mind and thought about it, I could understand Team Leader Park’s reaction. If I didn’t have a foresight ability, I might have reacted the same way if some said those words to me.

Why do you worry before you even try? You should be thinking about doing well… Something like that.

I might be the only person who could see the future. Because of that, I might be limited in what I can do but I still couldn’t act like someone who didn’t know anything.

Anyways, let’s stop with the worries that no one wants to hear.

I stopped trying to make Team Leader Park understand and threw a bomb.

“Honestly, I don’t have a good feeling about Time Slip and Mermaid out of Water. And my senses are very good.”

Team Leader Park, as well as the two employees, laughed their heads off.

“Hahaha! Then do you have a good feeling about Writer Hong Jumi?”

“Yes. A very good feeling. I think that it will be a success.”

When I nodded my head, these people fell to the floor laughing. Okay, laugh as much as you want. If I could bring you happiness, that was fine.

That was that.

“I really want to read her synopsis; would it be possible?”

“Wow, it’s been a long time since I laughed that hard. I can get you the synopsis. As long as you are careful not to leak it out to the public, there’s no problem in letting you read it. But, you’re Neptune’s manager. There’s no one that acts there so what are you going to do with that synopsis?”

I was wondering about that as well.

How could I use it well?

*

The W&U Chairman’s office.

Chairman Baek Hansung, the Management Team Business Department Head and the Management Team 2 Leader. As well as Son Chaeyeong and her manager, Chief Jo, were sitting around the two synopses.

It was the place where they would make the final decision for one of W&U's poster actress, Son Chaeyeong's, new series.

Team 2 Leader rubbed his beard and asked.

"I think the police officer character of Time Slip is more appealing. What do you think, Chaeyeong?"

"I like Mermaid out of Water."

"Really? Why?"

"Time Slip is IBC. I heard IBC has a lot of major series coming out next year. Then there will be plenty of outstanding candidates for the best performance award. For Mermaid out of Water, I will be the focus and since PBS's lineup for next year is weaker than IBC, wouldn't I be able to expect an award if the viewership ratings are high?"

Chairman Baek Hansung frowned when he heard her words.

"How could an actress pick her projects for an award? You need to think about it carefully."

“I did think about it carefully. I’ve been with W&U for so long yet I haven’t received the best performance award. I need to get it next year.”

Team 2 Leader laughed and coaxed her.

“Yeah, you need to get it. It’s time for our Chaeyeong to get the best performance award. This drama will be a definite hit so you just focus on acting and don’t worry about anything.”

Chairman Baek Hansung who was drinking coffee nodded his head.

If Chaeyeong brought an absurd synopsis he would have resolutely convinced her against it, but the synopsis for Mermaid out of Water was pretty good. It was actually the best along with Time Slip out of the synopses that were currently circulating.

“Okay. Both the synopses are good and whatever one we pick will have its pros and cons, so choose the one you want to do most. With no regrets.”

“Yes. Byunghwan oppa, contact Mermaid out of Water and tell them I’ll sign.”

“Sure. I’ll make sure the conditions match your preference.”

The department head who was only smiling broadly with no interference said.

“Good. I heard that Team Leader Park from the PR team was saying how there might be something with the director and writer of Time Slip and that they were looking into it. They said Team 3’s Lucky Charm told them. Although we don’t know if it’s true or not, it’s still concerning. However, since we chose to do Mermaid out of Water, we don’t need to worry about anything.”

Chaeyeong who was happily getting up became serious.

“Who?”

“Team 3’s Lucky Charm. He’s Neptune’s manager, why? Do you know him?”

Chief Jo read Chaeyeong’s mood and replied carefully.

“We saw him in the lounge a while ago. I asked him which one he thought would do better since it looked like luck followed him.”

“And?”

“I don’t know, he looked at both synopses and abruptly said that although the synopses were good, there were some concerns.”

“I say! He said that in front of you and Chaeyeong? What a

nonsensical fellow.”

“That’s what I said. He definitely has problems.”

“But what did he say he was concerned about?”

“Sorry? I-I don’t know. I didn’t ask him…”

Chief Jo was taken back and his words trailed off.

“You should have asked him. I’m curious.”

“Department Head. Don’t bring that up. I am still uncomfortable about it.”

Chaeyeong said unhappily. Team 2 Leader read her mood and loudly scolded for everyone to hear.

“Just because everyone is calling the fledgling, ‘Bonkdongee, Bokdonghee,’ he thinks the company is a pushover. Who’s that bastard’s superior? I think I have a talk with him.”

“Th…”

“That’s fine, that’ll do.”

When Chief Jo was about to answer, the department head waved

his hand and stopped him.

“Don’t do anything and just let him be. Since that team is doing well.”

“That kind of guy usually creates big trouble later on.”

“If a problem arises, I’ll take care of it then. Now, let’s get up.”

The department head who calmed the situation was the first to get up.

Just when the department head was about to exit the office after Song Chaeyeong, Chief Jo, and the Team 2 Leader, Chairman Baek Hansung’s voice stopped the department head in his tracks.

“That rookie. What was his name?”

“Sorry?”

“That Team 3’s Lucky Charm rookie.”

“Just what was his name? Jung… Ah, Jung Sunwoo.”

“Jung Sunwoo…”

Chairman Baek Hansung mumbled the name a few times.

Notes:

1] Children’s tale

Chapter 23: You Should Act (1)

Team Leader Park readily agreed to get me Writer Hong Jumi's synopsis and I vowed to never leak the synopsis to the public.

Afterwards, thoughts only pertaining to the synopsis floated around in my head.

Even during a meeting and throughout the time we ate dinner with an event agency employee and were drinking down boilermakers.

I constantly looked up Writer Hong Jumi on the internet but there wasn't much information. In her mid-thirties. Married. Released two romance novels under a pen name and was completely new to writing dramas.

So this person was the one who hit the jackpot with her debuting work?

Then after this drama ends, her worth would go up tremendously. And this would be the only time she would be troubled with casting actors as a new writer.

So it was definitely a chance that wouldn't come twice.

If I was assigned to an actor, I would have immediately looked up the date of the audition. But, I wasn't. Even though I knew this would be a huge success, I had no actors to push.

My actor… when I thought that, I recalled Sung Dowon.

Should I ask him?

My eyes shined for 3 seconds before I shook my head. Ridiculous. What did he lack that he would do a new writer's drama, on a cable network to boot? He was a top actor who people would cling to cast in a public network drama for $70, 000 per episode.

Was there a new actor in W&U that I could talk to?

I recalled the frames on the fifth-floor hallway before shaking my head again.

This wasn't right.

I was currently Neptune's manager. I couldn't go to a new actor, show him the synopsis and ask him to do it with me. Those people would all have their assigned managers as well.

It would be a relief if I didn't get beat for touching someone else's rice bowl[1]. Even if it was me, I would be frigging pissed.

So an actor with no assigned manager, did I have to find an aspiring actor outside of W&U? However, since I was part of W&U, I didn't know if it was possible to approach a different actor and even if it was possible, I didn't know what to do. Unless my

foresight ability kindly gave me new information on an aspiring actor that would pass the audition. Above all, I didn't have time to push this forward.

Since I was in a situation where I couldn't even go home and was sleeping in the company's sleeping quarters.

Of course, the traitor who lay above me and Hyunjo who lay on the other side were passed out.

Buzz.

My phone lit up as it vibrated.

Right, I forgot today was the day I was supposed to call my brother.

-Are you free to chat?

It seemed like someone had seen the light in that short moment as I heard someone move. I quickly put on my shoes and left the sleeping quarters. Blech... I was still drunk so every time I moved my head would ring.

I stood in the chilly hallway and called back. After a few rings, he answered.

-Yeah. Are you still working?

“I was lying down to sleep. I was going to call you once I finished but I forgot, sorry. Were you still up because of me?”

It was already passed 1 a.m. It was natural for me to be up at this hour but my brother was the type to sleep right at midnight.

-It’s fine. I got lost in reading and didn’t notice the time. Are you home?

“At the company.”

-You are still in Seoul, right? You haven’t been sold off to a faraway district, right?

“I am going back and forth from Chungdam-dong and Sangam-dong every day. Right now, I have no time. I’m constantly following behind Neptune but soon, the trai-, no, the person I work with and I are going to split the jobs and then I’ll have some breathing room.”

-Okay. Come to my house then. The kids are really looking forward to seeing you.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen them. When I would see them once every two days.”

-Come solidly prepared. It looks like they have a lot of questions

for you. When you come, we might even have to set up a press conference.

I held my phone as I laughed for a long time. So those kids were looking forward to seeing me? I wasn't sure if they were waiting for me or something else... even if it was a bit embarrassing, I should ask if I could obtain some signed Blackout CDs.

-I think celebrity managers are at the same level as superheroes and the president.

My laugh instantly died down. I even awoke from my drunken state.

With the mention of superheroes, I thought of my supernatural ability.

-You probably need to rest so let's hang up. Wear warm clothes. You don't have anything going on, right?

Unorganized words I weren't sure of crept up to my throat before I stopped them. The words that came out of my mouth would be the same as an everyday joke.

"Lots of things. Every day is dynamic."

-Haha. That fits well with you.

“I am not the same person as I was in the past. It’s been a while since my life’s changed to a fantasy blockbuster.”

This wasn’t a joke; it was the truth.

-Hahaha. That seems like fun.

I could hear my brother’s deep laugh.

As I was quietly listening, slowly a smile appeared on my lips.

It had a been a few days since my foresight ability suddenly squeezed into my life. At first I was at a loss, but afterwards, since it helped me, I embraced it. And the fact that no one knew and that I could be the sole person who possessed such an ability excited me as well.

However, somewhere in my heart, I felt nervous that I was caught in some unrealistic event.

It wasn’t like I confessed anything but just talking casually like this relaxed my heart. Although I was caught up in something unreal, I was still reassured that I had my life and my family.

I ended my call with my brother and went to the office. I didn’t know if it was because I awoke from my drunken state but I was thirsty.

I filled a paper cup to the brim with water, drank it and returned to the sleeping quarters with quick steps. It was too cold outside with only a t-shirt. If it was already like this, I wondered what I would do during the winter. Did I have to buy hot packs in bulk?

Brr, I needed to quickly slide myself into warm covers and rest my eyes for a bit.

Just when I was thinking that, my phone vibrated again.

-Oppa, sorry it's late. Are you still at the company?

It was a message from Seoyoung.

-Yeah. Why?

-Songha still hasn't come home. She doesn't answer her phone. Could you check if she's in the practice room? I'm so worried I can't sleep. T^T

-Okay. I'll go check.

-Yes yes. Thank you!

I got on the elevator and went to the practice room located in the basement. It wasn't strange for Songha to stay late in the practice room. Since even I had seen her there a few times. At first, when I saw her roaming around with her hair down, my heart felt like it

was about to stop.

Although Neptune did practice a lot, Songha was the one that spent the most time practicing among them.

As expected, the lights of the practice room were lit today as well.

Knock, knock.

I knocked a few times but there was no answer. When I opened the door and entered, I saw Songha coolly moving in front of the dance mirror. She was in the middle of practicing the choreography and the vocals of Neptune's title track. She practiced for so long that even her back was soaking wet.

I closed the door and briefly observed Songha.

Her actions and expression reflected on the mirror.

I thought this when I first saw her but Songha really wasn't simply pretty.

Maybe she was born with it or she was doing it deliberately but she really had a certain charm.

"Oh, my."

It seemed like the song had ended during the time I was blankly staring at her. Songha's eyes widened and her face stiffened as she turned towards me.

"When did you come?"

"Just now. Seoyoung was worried that she couldn't contact you."

"Ah... I didn't know it was already this late."

Songha who was surprised when she saw her phone replied to a text.

"I will just do another hour. You can go in first."

"You have to wake up before the sun rises for your schedule tomorrow. Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm fine. I eat as much as I use."

So there was a reason why she would eat so much every meal.

"You're working hard, practicing until morning by yourself."

"...Because I'm worried."

"About what?"

“They might lose because of me.”

“Lose… Ah. The mission for Next K-Star?”

“Yes.”

I could feel the worry in her voice.

So she was practicing this hard for the team mission.

The reason why she felt sad was because even if she practiced for an incredible amount of time, she wasn’t as good at singing as Taehee and she wasn’t as good at dancing as Seoyoung. That was why her position was subvocal and subdancer. And rap, well there was nothing to say.

She knew herself that she was lacking compared to the other members. And that was why she would practice alone.

Since she thought she was a burden to the team.

Even though her skills were lacking relative to the others, she had the most parts in the center in their dance. Even in music videos, her face would come up the most often. It definitely was a weight on her shoulders.

Although Hyunjo said that she had the most exposure since she

was the prettiest, my thoughts were different. I couldn't say it in case they said, "What would you know?"

From my personal opinion, Songha's acting was good.

A short 3-minute 40-second track definitely had a story. Neptune's title track was about a woman who struggles between a man she loves and a man who loves her. The lyrics expressed the conflicted heart very well.

Although the girls were good at dancing and singing, outstanding singing abilities and dance skills weren't able to convey that emotion. It did look like those girls tried hard to convey it but they seemed to come short by 2%.

However, Songha was able to convey the conflicting emotion in the lyrics as they were. With only her expression and voice. It didn't even look like she was trying hard either.

So for the 3 minutes and 40 seconds, no, for the few seconds Songha would sing, I would be completely immersed in it. And of course, the lyrics would pour into my ears.

I thought that was really impressive.

It was a bit regrettable that she didn't think that way and only urged herself to practice areas she lacked.

No matter how much I thought about it, she really should be an

actor...

I abruptly revealed the thoughts I had while observing her.

“Songha.”

“Yes?”

“Did you ever think about acting?”

Huh?

I came to the future at a completed unexpected time.

I quickly grasped my surroundings. This time was once again the hazy failed connected future. I was sitting on a beige chair looking at a video on a laptop.

The table seemed very familiar... Ah, this was the meeting room.

The person in the video was Songha. She looked similar to her current age. Her hairstyle was different. It was the same straight black hair but it was bit longer. If you weren’t sharp-sighted, you wouldn’t notice it but in preparation for situations like this, I meticulously remembered the girls’ appearances.

How long would it take for her hair to grow that much? No, since

she could have cut it when it was longer, I can't determine the date just from her hair.

But what was Songha doing?

I narrowed my eyes and concentrated. In the video, Songha was talking and moving by herself. Because of the static, I couldn't hear it clearly but it seemed like she was talking in both Korean and English.

Was she perhaps... acting?

"Is that all?"

Someone asked from behind. Who was it?

My future self didn't even look at the person behind me and replied.

"Yes. We just need to send it."

"But how did they know about Songha and send her a synopsis?"

They sent a synopsis?

Then was she really acting? Was this an audition video?

“It looks like their casting director coincidentally saw her playing an interpreter and added her on their list.”

“Aha… She really did play that one well. It was the rediscovering of Songha.”

As expected!

I knew it. My thoughts were right.

That Songha would be good at acting.

I forcefully calmed down my excitement and shoved the information into my head. Role as an interpreter and a casting director coincidentally saw her acting and added her to their list.

The person behind me threw his thick arm on my shoulder. And I heard his voice.

“But do we really not know what this project is?”

“We really don’t. We don’t know the title and the director. We don’t even know her role. It is a completely closed door audition. I am curious about their identity as well.”

“Damn…”

“If Songha goes to the final audition… we’ll probably know then.”

“Acting?”

When I regained my senses, I was once again in the practice room.

In front of me, Songha was staring at me with a sour look.

At that moment, without my knowledge, without any filters, these words popped out.

“Yeah. You should act.”

Notes:

1] So their paycheck

Chapter 24: You Should Act (2)

Shoot! I should have thought it through before saying that.

While I was motionless as if my brain was lagging, Songha dried off her sweat and said.

“I can’t act.”

“What? Why can’t you? What’s there not to do?”

And W&U would probably be able to push you in that direction if you want.

“I can’t act.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not that I’m not doing it, I can’t.”

“Why? Why can’t you act?”

“If you ask me why I can’t… I just can’t.”

“No, you are go…!”

I flinched while I was speaking.

When I saw Songha, she was staring at me as if I was some strange person. Keep it together. I couldn't confuse the future and the present. Even though in the future, they said Songha was good at acting and that it was the rediscovery of Songha, it might not be true right now.

Then just what happened?

What did we have to do for that future to occur?

Did she start acting because her future as an artist was faint? No. Looking at how she said she couldn't act, it seemed like she had already tried.

It seemed like she had bad memories embedded in her. Just the word 'act' made her expression stiffen and above all, when she said she couldn't act, her tone was too resolute.

Then was it through daily practice that she was able to progress from terrible acting to great?

Or was she just a late bloomer?

"Have you learned acting properly? Who said you weren't good at acting? Could you maybe show..."

I was rapid firing questions until my last question trailed off. Since a while ago, Songha was looking at me while slowly packing her things. She put on her thick padded coat and her bag. Then she approached me who was blankly staring at her and bowed her head.

“I am going to go. Good night.”

“Huh?”

Then she disappeared like the wind.

...What the. Did she just escape?

In the end, I spent the rest of my night worrying.

Just why did Songha show such a bad reaction when I asked if she wanted to act?

And the audition video of Songha I saw in the future.

Honestly, at that time, I glossed over it but no matter how much I thought about it laying on the bed, I found it strange.

Unknown title, unknown director, unknown role, yet a closed door audition? Did people even audition like that in this country? How secretive was this project? And she wasn’t even auditioning in front of someone but through a video?

Just why?

The more I thought about, my suspicions narrowed towards a certain direction.

Keeping the scenario under a strictly maintained system as if it was a military secret. Songha fluently mixing Korean and English in her acting. The casting director coincidentally saw her acting as an interpreter gave her a chance to audition... if it was like that then maybe Holly...

No. Get a hold of yourself, you crazy bastard.

My excitement went too far. It wasn't like it was the next town over?

Even veteran actors who had spent ten, twenty years in the country couldn't easily dream of that place. Even though W&U was knocking on every door, indiscriminately pushing their actors in minor and supporting roles, the reality was that it was like filling a bucket with a hole with water.

But Songha?

Let's stop this silly sleep talking. I couldn't even sleep a wink.

I rubbed my hands on my face and got up from the bed. The day

had already started.

Perhaps it was the effect of Next K-Star but Neptune was appearing on a public network music broadcast. If we wanted to get them all dressed up to look pretty on camera, we had move quickly starting early morning. Well, I was now used to seeing the moon when I leave and the moon when I come back.

On our way to pick up the girls, I asked Hyunjo the question I had been waiting to ask.

“Chief. About Songha.”

“Yeah.”

“Did she ever get acting lessons?”

Hyunjo chugged down a hangover relief drink and replied.

“Just look at her appearance. Is her appearance something that falls behind others?”

“No.”

“Then do you think we would have never thought of getting her to act?”

“Then…”

“Obviously, she got personal lessons.”

So she did get them.

“If she wasn’t to the point of receiving insults, we were looking into getting her in a leading role on a public network weekend drama but it didn’t look like God gave everything to a single person. Apparently, Songha has no talent in acting.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think? Her teacher obviously. That person looked at quite a few of our girls. Bora, Suran, and even Chaeyeong received lessons from him. So we sent Songha to him but he apparently said that even though her face was pretty, it couldn’t cover up her poor acting skills. And after getting acting lessons, Songha said she would not act.”

“That’s unexpected. When you see their music videos, she looks like she would be good at it.”

“Since music videos have no lines. Even I was a bit regretful and tried to convince her but she wouldn’t budge. It seems like she lost all interest in that field.”

Well, she did run away as soon as I brought up acting yesterday.

But in the future, Songha was definitely acting... good even. Then did that mean that there would be something that would change her mind later on?

Anyways, it looked like I had to investigate further. I needed to finish my other priorities first.

We picked up the girls at their apartment and went to the shop. From there, we drove for a long time and arrived at the Yeouido studio. Still, the scheduled time was later than Knet so it had been a while since the sky turned bright.

“Huh? It’s Neptune.”

“Who?”

“Neptune. They appearing on Next K-Star with my bias[1].”

Due to the fact that they got much more exposure through entertainment articles, more people recognized them than before. Although there weren’t people taking their pictures and no one clung to them for a sign, I was expecting that day would come once they placed first on a music broadcast.

After they introduced themselves to other groups’ fans for a while, we entered the studio. The waiting room was the same size as the one from Knet. And having nothing to do but wait was the same as well.

I prepared a lot after the last experience. A fully charged backup smartphone battery. I even brought a phone charger just in case.

As well as an eye mask. On my first day, I was too excited and nervous to sleep but after a few days of being a manager, I became a master at taking naps. Now, no matter where I was, I could sleep anywhere. I could say I evolved to survive.

When the time had come for them to greet their seniors, Seoyeong grabbed the back of Songha's neck. Then she said the words she constantly repeated since they arrived at the shop.

"Songha. Just because you're a regular member of an entertainment program now doesn't mean you can get on your high horse since it could mean trouble, okay? They will immediately gossip about us. Okay?"

"I know."

"Your face looks sullen if you just stay there, so stay conscious of your actions and smile. Okay?"

"I know... Nagging all day..."

As soon as Songha lowered her head and mumbled, Seoyoung's eyes narrowed.

“Right now, we move together but if we do well in Next K-Star, we’re going to get our own personal schedules as well. How could I rest easy if I let you go by yourself? If you’re like this in front of others, you’re going to be punished for having no manners and you’re going to cry…”

I could memorize that repertoire.

It looked like Songha gave up on escaping Seoyoung’s nagging as she listened with a blank face. And Taehee and LJ stayed far away from them. Only when they entered another singer’s waiting room did Seoyoung’s background music like nagging stop.

We went to greet each waiting room in turn and smiled when new groups and their managers came to introduce themselves. Now that they had a regular program, they were slightly more composed in front of these new girl groups. Somehow, I felt proud.

Since I had already experienced this schedule before, time passed by like a stream. Hyunjo who was closely observing the traitor and me was happy saying that next time he could show up late to show his face.

I rested until 12, then I went to buy their snacks. The traitor was the driver today, so it was my job to buy the snacks. Now that I knew the girls’ preferences, I instantly picked everything out and was about to return to the studio…

What was that?

In the corner of the hallway leading to the waiting rooms, Seoyoung and Songha, as well as three Sugar Cats members, were gathered. Now that we had some uncomfortable meetings, every time I saw our members with Sugar Cats, I became anxious. That one day it would explode.

As the distance between us shortened, I could hear their voices.

“Songha’s the one usually in the center. Right?”

“There is a bit more emphasis on Songha but since there’s four of us, it’s quite similar.”

“Honestly, you’re the best as dancing and Taehee unni is the best at singing. And everyone knows that LJ is skilled at rapping. If you’re going to beat your unnis, Songha, you need to try hard. You bring the team down so what are you going to do if people insult you for getting the center because of your face?”

Was she sarcastically saying that Songha was the worst at singing, dancing, and rapping in the team and that she got her center position because of her looks?

I half-sprinted. I thought that they would exchange superficial greetings and go on their ways today. Perhaps it was because there were no cameras or people but there were thorns in their words. Not hidden ones, sharp thorns that stuck out.

I thought it would be better to act like they were busy and bring

them away.

I almost arrived when Seoyoung smiled as she said.

“Don’t worry. She practices a ton. I’m worried that she might even quickly catch up to us.”

“Wow. Your team members are really kind. We weren’t that happy in the past.”

“What?”

“When you had the center position, we weren’t that happy.”

Notes:

1] Bias is what people call ‘their favorite idol group

Chapter 25: You Should Act (3)

I thought I heard a sound somewhere. The sound of ice breaking.

Songha didn't have any reaction when they insulted her but when they changed their target to Seoyoung, she wrinkled her brows. When Songha was about to step forward, Seoyoung grabbed her arm.

"I guess we were shallow. Then let's see each other during the Next K-Star filming!"

After making the mood into an icy winter, the Sugar Cats members gently waved their hands and disappeared. With the same slightly smiling faces. What was more, they even bowed politely at me.

Like... if you don't like them, then just swear!

Spit! Fight! After a fight, at least you would be refreshed!

This felt worse because it felt like we were beaten up by a shadow fist.

When I first saw them, I thought they were bright, kind girls. For their insides to be so black. As expected, my eyes were fish eyes.

That was that but I had to do something about Seoyoung whose

head was lowered. Songha kept wriggling and kept giving signals to do something.

I didn't have any experience in comforting a grown woman but since I had a lot of experiences comforting young girls...

"Seoyoung."

"I'm fine."

Before I could do anything, Seoyoung raised her head. I was worried she might be crying but her face was fine.

"It's not the first time. I don't pay attention to those words."

Seoyoung spent the longest time away from her parents as a trainee and W&U was her third company. I now knew that that wouldn't have been easy. That was probably why she was strong enough to endure her past colleagues' sarcastic remarks.

I put away comforting her and said in a half-joking, half serious manner.

"Just where do kids like them come from? I should have fought them for you."

Seoyoung's expression slowly relaxed. She patted my back with her small hand.

“You can’t. We are just now getting popular, we can’t get into trouble because of me. At a time when we can’t be too careful.”

“Next time, I butt in quickly and clear them away. Do they have excess energy? Why do always come to fight you?”

“It’s best to just ignore them. Oppa, have you ever heard the word, ByungMukGeum[1]?

I saw it on the internet.

“…Don’t feed assholes?”

“Yup, it’s that. I am only going to work hard on the things I need to do. I bet if I succeed, they would probably lie sick in bed due to anger.”

“Would they? Then after we place first, let’s go visit them at the hospital.”

I was 100% serious.

“Ehahahaha! I really wish that happens!”

The vigorously laughing Seoyoung grabbed Songha’s hand who was following behind us.

“Don’t worry about them and forget it. Don’t go create a fight. Okay?”

Songha’s expression was still a bit sour.

“Why aren’t you answering me? Okay?”

“Okay.”

Eventually, Songha wasn’t able to resist any longer and nodded her head.

We returned to the waiting room and ate our fill to relieve ourselves. When Seoyoung ate a large amount of snacks she usually wouldn’t even touch, the traitor poked my side and asked.

“Did something happen outside?”

“Nothing much.”

Ah. There was one next to me, a fellow with black insides.

The traitor backed away with a puzzled look. I looked at the traitor’s back differently. Although I kept calling him a traitor, the shock from my first day was slowly starting to fade. Since the traitor I have seen so far was a good natured guy who worked hard at his job.

Perhaps if I didn't see the future on my first day, we would be really close?

Although I was trying my best not to let my guard down, my thoughts were getting more complicated. If Reporter Song didn't say, 'so that person was like that before,' I might have considered it to be the greed of a new recruit and let down my guard already.

Just how was the traitor living 20 years from now?

Since Reporter Song, who was an entertainment reporter, knew of him, it seemed like he probably still worked in this industry...

It was complicated. There was a limit to by brain capacity but there were too many concerning words and people. I needed a day to organize them all before they overload.

After eating snacks, I left with the girls for their dress rehearsal. With a nametag the size of an A4 paper on their chests.

When I first saw it, I found it funny but it was a must-have item here. For groups with a lot of members, especially with new groups, it was impossible for the producers to memorize all their names.

Hyunjo had an external meeting so he was absent and the traitor and I took pictures of the rehearsal with our phones. Since it wasn't a stage they were comfortable with, we would take pictures

at different angles and then they would adjust their expressions and choreography accordingly. To show the audience a more perfect performance.

And that was how we spent our waiting time as the live broadcasting time approached.

While we were waiting for Hyunjo after we had finished our preparations, we heard a knock on the door.

“Come in.”

I thought it was someone who came to greet us but when I opened the door a camera popped in.

“We came to film the VCR.”

“Sorry?”

“The video to introduce the next group. It’s only 15 seconds so could you all gather here for a second.”

Before he left, Hyunjo said that they would come film an introduction video, so it was this.

A female writer or someone handed the girls who were in the middle of practicing a palm-sized script and explained.

“First introduce your group, the song Neptune is going to introduce is Kim Jongsu’s ‘3 Falls’ and Sky’s ‘Don’t follow me’. You just need to talk in order and…”

She scanned the four girls’ faces and picked Songha.

“Ms. Songha, at the end, please act like you’re walking in your spot and quickly turn your head and say the title of the song, ‘Don’t follow me’. Everyone else can act like they are following her and stop. It’ll be cheesy if everyone is too serious, so just have fun with it.”

“Yes!”

I saw it a lot when I was monitoring music broadcasts. No matter how they did it or who did it, the introduction video would always be cheesy.

The girls memorized a one-sentence dialogue and filmed the 15-second introduction video. They started with ‘Hello, we are Neptune!’ and introduce Kim Jongsu’s lovely emotional ballad, ‘3 Falls’.

Seoyoung sweetly said.

“And the next song is from the one who returned as a bad girl, Sky’s.”

Lastly. Songha walked in place and the other girls acted like they

were stealthily following her. She suddenly stopped and turned her head.

Her waving hair gently fell down and…

“Don’t follow me.”

They immediately said, ‘okay’. The satisfied camera team left the waiting room and the traitor and the girls high-fived each other saying that they thought it went well.

I couldn’t join them and blankly stood there.

Because… I was looking at Songha.

You’re good at acting!

After that day, I observed Songha.

It wasn’t stalking, more like stealthily watching Songha’s every move?

I watched their music video and the behind the scenes video tens of times. I reduced my already insufficient sleep and the result I came to after my analysis was that Songha was never to the point of being called terrible at acting.

In fact, in my perspective, it looked like she was really talented.

Although I wasn't a professional, there was even a scene where the music video director specifically pointed out Songha and gave her a compliment.

But why didn't she get a good assessment during her acting lessons?

I even found out the name of the teacher who gave Songha acting lessons and investigated his background. Just in case he was a sham... but he really was someone who W&U trusted and used. He even taught a few actors from other companies.

I once again sneakily brought up acting a few times but I only ended up seeing Songha's escaping figure.

A day, two days... a few days went by without any improvements.

And today.

I finally got a call from the PR team and was on my way to the fifth floor. I pushed down my excitement and tightly held the coffee box. It was the coffee Team Leader Park said to buy if I wanted to receive what I asked for.

As soon as I got the call, I almost flew to the coffee shop and bought the largest size. To get the anticipated Writer Hong Jumi's synopsis in my hands, coffee was nothing.

“I brought the coffee!”

I handed out the coffee as soon as I entered the PR team office. The employees and Team Leader Park happily picked theirs.

I scanned the desks with my eyes but I couldn’t find the synopsis. Where was it?

“Team Leader Park. Sy…”

“Aha, here’s what you asked for.”

As I gulped down my saliva as I waited, Team Leader Park put a small paper bag on top of my hands.

Huh? It was smaller than I expected.

The moment I put my trembling hands in the bag, my excitement died down.

“4 signed Blackout CDs.”

“Ah…”

Right. I did. I did ask for these as well.

A few days ago, when I met Team Leader Park downstairs, I remembered my nieces and nephews and asked if I could get some. Since it wasn't one or two but four copies, I told her that if it was too much of burden, it didn't matter if she couldn't get some and left.

Since Team Leader Park especially got them for me, I couldn't show that I was disappointed and quickly changed my expression.

"Thank you. My nieces and nephews are huge fans. They would probably faint if I gave it to them."

"Well, we are co-workers. It's not like you asked for Blackout member's phone numbers and getting signed CDs aren't undoable favors. And..."

With a sly smile, Team Leader Park placed something on top of the paper bag.

A clean stack of papers with no creases.

On the front page, it had the title, <16-part miniseries-Cat Guardian Angel>, and at the very bottom were the names of the director and the screenwriter.

Writer Hong Jumi.

"This...!"

“They say they are doing it on TVL? This is the one you asked for, right?”

“Yes. It’s this. Thank you!”

“If you’re thankful, then just buy us coffee next time.”

When I treated the synopsis like a treasure, the female employee tilted her head.

“But it looked like Mr. Manager’s senses were wrong? I read it first and I found it a bit childish.”

“Right. And the whole ‘animal repaying the debt’ theme is a bit worn-out.”

Harsh reviews came out of the two employees’ mouths.

“When you just read the synopsis, it didn’t really draw you in, right?”

“Well, sorta like an ‘it really is a cable drama’ feeling?”

It was the same in the future I saw. They said that everyone who read the synopsis said it was childish and stale.

This really was it.

I said my farewells to the PR team employees and left with a quick pace. And I sat down in the fourth-floor lounge and read the first page.

Aha. After reading the first few pages, I understood.

Why the synopsis didn’t get good reviews.

The synopsis was the same as a preview, they had to write it very interestingly to get investors and actors captivated by it. They would have to word common and stale parts as something special and occasionally put in an overseas location that was never scheduled.

It was to the point where there would be a writer who would solely work on the synopsis.

And classic examples of that were Time Slip and Mermaid out of Water.

But this synopsis was written too honestly. It wasn’t a catalog designed to sell to others but just plainly organized out, like homework for example?

I didn’t care about the lack of polish and focused on the plot.

A cold winter. An ordinary female lead picked up a collapsed cat on her way home. Its outward appearance was filthy but it was a cat with pretty blue eyes. The female lead devoted herself to take care of the cat but it died on the next day.

And then the cat came back as a ghost to repay the female lead who let it die peacefully.

So that was why the title was Cat Guardian Angel.

From then on, the ghost cat would interfere with the female lead's daily and love life, sometimes being helpful and other times, causing trouble. Well, it was a romantic comedy where in the end she became respected at her work and ended up in a relationship with a handsome superior due the cat.

Just looking at the synopsis, it really deserved being called childish and stale.

Ah, but there was an interesting twist in the cat and the female lead's relationship.

A twist where the cat came overseas from the US. Due to some circumstances, the cat ended up collapsing in Korea and dying but in any case, because of this, the ghost cat could only speak English. And the female lead would get butterflies in her stomach when she spoke English.

So the female lead had no choice but to hire an interpreter to talk

with the cat guardian angel…

Huh?

Wait.

What was this?

I flipped to the character introduction page. The female lead, the male lead, cat… and at the bottom, something I couldn’t believe was written there.

Interpreter.

Notes:

1] Koreans sometimes shorten a phrase by taking the first character of each word

Chapter 26: The Calm Before The Storm (1)

An interpreter role that appeared in the drama, Cat Guardian Angel.

And the information about how Songha played an interpreter role in the future.

Could this be a coincidence?

If it really was a coincidence, just that would send shivers down my spine. It wasn't like it was friend 1 and 2 and an interpreter wasn't a role that was in every drama. No matter how I thought about it, it wasn't a coincidence.

But, if I thought that way, it was also strange.

In the future I saw, Cat Guardian Angel was already a fish that got away.

Since the PR team employees were regretting not doing it due to scheduling issues when W&U got contacted about it. If Songha showed off her good acting skills in that role than the PR team employees would have mentioned it.

Then, it meant that, in that future, there was no relationship between Songha and Cat Guardian Angel...

And the future I saw that night, they said that Songha was really good at acting as an interpreter. That it was the rediscovery of Songha. Then that meant that Songha really was cast for the Cat Guardian Angel drama.

Then… did the future change?

Because I asked Songha if she wanted to act?

Wait. Let’s think about this.

The first future I saw, the future set twenty years in the future, the one with Director Park and Reporter Song was a fixed future. When I changed the present, that future didn’t change. That was why I thought it was set in a parallel universe.

But why did the future change this time?

After carefully thinking about it, there was a definite difference. Everything was clear in the fixed future and although it would cut off in the middle, it was still the continuation of the interview with Director Park and Reporter Song.

However, the changed futures, the hazy ones with a bad signal, showed a relatively closer future. It wasn’t like they were a continuation of the past ones and the people, time and place were always different.

Was it because it was a flexible future which could change that

everything was hazy?

"Ah... I think I'm going crazy."

Now that I confirmed that my actions would change the future, honestly, I was scared.

I gulped down my saliva.

There was a high possibility that twenty years from now, I would be a management company chairman.

Since he said that I that I struggled my way to the top, I probably went through a lot when I was young. And since he told Reporter Song that there was still much to do, it meant that I wasn't satisfied and was looking at a higher goal.

However, to my present self, that future was a successful one.

If I didn't change anything, that future would have been mine.

But... could I?

When I had the synopsis that would be a hit in my hands right now? Even when I knew that soon Sung Dowon would be caught in a perverted sex scandal trap that someone set up and that there would be a reversal later?

A chance only given to me, would I be able to live my life ignoring potentially life changing information and only look at the future twenty years from now?

I wasn't confident.

I had already changed the future where I would have been backstabbed by the traitor and didn't regret it at all. If I only watched the situation unfold even when I knew what would happen, it meant that I would have to watch the traitor getting called Lucky Charm. Then I might have fainted due to anger issues.

I pondered for a long time before getting up.

Since it was already like this, let's do it without fear.

I didn't know how long my foresight ability would help me... but let's see if I could shape a better future with my hands.

After that day.

I thought of the best result from the information I knew so far. Since I was unable to obtain any more information about Sung Dowon's case, the focus was obviously on Neptune.

After smoothly raising Neptune's popularity, I would try to help them get first on their next album. Also, I would try to get Songha to play the role of an interpreter for the Cat Guardian Angel

drama.

This was the best I could think of.

So I tried to persuade Songha more aggressively.

Neptune was thoroughly preparing for the Next K-Star mission and there was nothing I could help them with at this time but Songha was different.

Of course, if Songha didn't get the part, she might gloss over it but I felt like I would regret it so much that I wouldn't be able to bare it.

I will definitely settle this today.

I held snacks in both hands as I made my way to the company. There was nothing scheduled today, so the girl would be gathered in the basement practice room practicing. As soon as I opened the door, I could see the girls sweating while they practiced their choreography in front of the mirror.

But there was only three. Where did Songha go?

"Oh? Doesn't oppa have the day off today?"

The quick-witted Seoyoung was the first spot me.

“Right. I was passing by when I decided to visit.”

“Really?”

Of course, it was a lie. What kind of crazy bastard would loiter around their company on their day off?

The reason why I came here on my precious day off was because I was in a hurry. I had to convince Songha before they started the auditions for Cat Guardian Angel.

“I bought some snacks, so take a break and eat.”

I handed out everything I had in my hands. Besides one bag.

“What’s that?”

“This is something I bought for Songha. Where is she?”

“The bathroom. Why? Are you going to ask her about acting again?”

“Yeah.”

“Songha’s stubbornness is no joke but oppa is amazing too. Hyunjo oppa tried several times before giving up.”

If Hyunjo knew what I knew, he would probably chase her around with lunch boxes to persuade her.

Anyways, to these girls who didn't know anything, I probably did look persistent in their eyes.

After stopping their practice, the approaching Taehee sat down on the floor and opened her mouth.

"I heard that you originally applied to the actor team."

"Huh?"

"I investigated and heard that you said you wanted to join the actor team during your interview."

What did you do?

I was surprised but Seoyoung and LJ looked at me with wide eyes.

Taehee lowered her head and said.

"Sorry. There are just so many weird people in the world. I investigated because we had to stay together every day. In the past, there was someone who tried to take a picture of us naked."

“What a crazy…”

“That’s what I’m saying. But… are you trying to convince Songha for that reason? Because you want to be assigned to an actor?”

What?

“That’s not it. If Songha really doesn’t want to act, I won’t force her. I won’t bring it up again.”

Since the most important part was Songha’s thoughts.

If she really didn’t want to become an actress, a successful drama wasn’t a chance for her.

“Songha had a hard time when she took acting lessons.”

Taehee sighed as she said.

“I didn’t witness it myself but it seemed like she was being harshly punished by the instructor.”

She was punished?

LJ and Seoyoung added in.

“She really was stressed then.”

“Right. Even when she was scolded tons of times by our vocal and dance instructors, I never saw her discouraged. She was originally a girl who be fine after eating but she looked really pitiable when she was getting acting lessons. It was the first time I had seen her like that.”

“Since she had to relieve her pent-up stress, she would be depressed while eating 3 servings of food every night and then she eventually quit.”

“It looked like she was looking forward to acting lessons before she started…”

Did she get traumatized during her lessons?

Was that why she would slowly escape whenever I brought it up?

I met eyes with Taehee who spoke with a heavy tone.

“Like you said. If Songha really doesn’t want to do it, please don’t force her.”

“Of course.”

I immediately nodded my head.

“But if she thinks she is bad at acting, it really is regrettable. I

think Songha will really be good at it.”

“…What do you think?”

Taehee looked behind me and asked.

“Do you want to act again? Or do you not?”

I hurriedly turned around and saw Songha standing behind the half-opened door.

It was silent for a moment. As if she had something say, she scratched her head with a complicated expression and sat next to me.

She had only escaped until now. Was she finally prepared to say something?

As I was expectedly waiting for an answer, Songha looked at the bag I was holding.

“What is this smell?”

“Oh? This? It’s sweet pancakes made with sticky rice and brown sugar filling. Want it?”

“Please.”

I handed her the whole bag. And I quietly waited while Songha was eating the pancakes. Though I did give her a wet wipe to wipe off the sugar filling dripping out of the pancake.

“Wipe it with this.”

“Ah… Thank you.”

“Your wrist too.”

“Yes.”

“You have some on your chin.”

“Yes.”

What was this! I was about to clean it like I did with my nephews and nieces.

Soon after, Songha’s clean mouth opened.

“Do you really think I will be good at acting?”

“I think so.”

“He said that kids like me should never become actresses.”

What did you say?

“Actors who were originally idols had make pain-staking efforts to rid themselves of that tag. If someone like me who wasn’t good at acting and had nothing to show was to become an actress, I would be insulting my seniors... And that I was taking away the chance new actors could have and to not even show myself and quit acting lessons.”

“... Your acting instructor said that?”

Songha nodded her head.

I was speechless. That she should never act, not show her face? If anyone heard those words, of course, they would quit! Wasn’t this person who called himself an instructor completely crushing a young girl’s ambitions? With what thoughts did he say that?

“Songha. Did he really say that?”

“What kind of person is that? Why would he say such things?”

“You frustrating kid! Why did you who is so good at speaking roughly to us just listen to that? Why didn’t you tell us?!”

The other girls were fuming with anger. Songha looked like she

had more to say and was avoiding their eyes.

I abruptly got up.

“I’ll be back.”

I will go up to the office and find the instructor’s phone number, then I will ask him why he said that to Songha.

I pressed the fourth-floor button but the elevator stopped at the first floor. And someone I had met once or twice in the company got on. With an incredibly serious expression.

What happened?

The bearded middle-aged man grilled someone.

“Why isn’t Sung Dowon coming? Where is he right now?”

“He was in the middle of a photo shoot…”

“Is a photo shoot the problem right now?!”

“They said they stopped everything and are on their way here. They will be here soon.”

“Did you check with Sung Dowon? How much of it is real?”

“That is…”

“Wait.”

The bearded man glanced at me who was in the corner.

“Let’s talk when we get up. And tell Sung Dowon to come right away.”

The elevator arrived at the fourth floor. As soon as I got off, the elevator went up.

The sixth floor, where the chairman’s office was.

I instinctively knew.

It had started.

Chapter 27: The Calm Before The Storm (2)

-The person you are calling is busy at the moment, please leave a message after the beep…

Beep.

I hung up and slouched on the chair.

It was already the fourth time. For some reason, the acting lesson teacher who swore at Lee Songha was so busy that he wouldn’t answer the phone.

To be honest, my mind was a tangled mess long before this.

I blankly stared up at the ceiling.

Just what kind of conversation were they having up there?

Did Sung Dowon arrive?

How was the situation progressing?

In my head, I wanted to run up immediately, but I knew too much to do that. To be exact, I had a lot of snippets of information, but, because I wasn’t certain, I couldn’t open my mouth.

"... Let's try to piece things together as much as I can."

First, what I was almost certain about.

Sung Dowon attended the perverted sex party as did the married woman, and the anonymous man approached W&U through some newspaper company. The newspaper company demanded money if they wanted to quietly cover it up and W&U gave the anonymous man money to shut his mouth.

But then they said that it eventually came out in the news?

Vulgar baseless rumors started to spread and the fact that W&U tried to cover it up with money and that there was photo evidence revealing it, dropping Sung Dowon's public image to the floor.

And not long after, the situation reversed. This was the critical point.

I could assume that everything up until now was true. As it had come directly from Director Park's mouth.

Secondly, the information I obtained about Sung Dowon from the future with a bad signal.

The fact that his acting career might have ended after falling for 'their trick'.

Let’s put that aside for now. As I haven’t done anything to change this future yet.

The nuance from their ‘trick’ as well as Director Park’s words about how the situation reversed. Because of this, I was suspicious that this might be a trap set up by Sung Dowon’s previous company, Pure Star Entertainment... But this was only my thought. I wasn’t certain.

It was this part that was frustrating.

If I knew who the anonymous person was I could come forward right now.

I hoped that I would see the future once again just before the incident occurred, but there were no hints of my foresight ability activating after making multiple different attempts.

What could I say at this time?

‘I think this is a trick someone cooked up to mess with Sung Dowon. I know this sounds crazy but don’t believe everything that comes up and be suspicious of the possibility of a mastermind. There’s photo evidence. Right? You have to be suspicious about that.’

I couldn’t say this. It was simply too crazy.

Above all, if this was normal, I shouldn’t know anything about

this situation. If they ask me how I knew there was a photo, I had nothing to say. Even if I assumed I could get away with it by lying, I had to lie within my bounds. Lies would breed more lies and it would undoubtedly turn into a snowball effect.

Then let's change my direction.

'Though it might seem like it's the worst possible situation, it'll feel like a sudden shower once it passes. The situation will reverse soon. So there's no need to be so worried.'

No! These were words of a crazy person! I felt like I needed to tell them to use talismans!

I was pulling my hairs, trying to come up with something.

Should I just say I have a supernatural power? Though I am worried about the consequences, this was the easiest lie.

It wasn't a bad card. Although I would be called a crazy bastard, if the events go on like I said, I'd be reevaluated.

The lead shaman manager. Haha.

"Ahh...."

"What are you doing?"

Surprised, I turned around to see Kim Hyunjo standing there with a sunken face.

“Chief. Hello.”

“I told you to rest today, why did you come? You don’t know when you’ll have a break after today.”

“I had something to say to the girls so I came for a moment. But chief, why are you…”

“I came here for a meeting with other chiefs, but it got pushed back. Quickly go home once you’re done. The company is a bit restless today.”

I gulped down my saliva.

“Is it because of Sung Dowon?”

Showing a surprised face, he came close to me and asked.

“How do you know that? Don’t tell me there have been articles?”

“No. I overheard some people talking about it in the elevator. But…”

That moment.

The foresight I had been waiting for activated.

“About that photo evidence.”

With no time to adjust, I opened my ears wide to listen to Director Park’s words.

Considering the fact that they opened with the photo, was this a continuation from before?

“It was photoshopped.”

photoshopped?

As expected, they did something to the photo evidence!

“While it’s true Sung Dowon attended the party, they couldn’t get a good picture. So they skillfully combined the pictures and because it was true that Sung Dowon attended the party, they realized this fact too late. Afterwards, W&U sued the newspaper company for abusing them without proper investigation. Articles were deleted and they released the truth and caused a commotion. Back then, I too received tons of angry phone calls.”

It was almost complete. Now if only I could learn who was behind all this...!

“Who was the one who created the photo and did all this?”

I wanted to kowtow in front of Reporter Song if it was possible.

“Well, it ended with… a fraudulent paparazzi created the photo and was caught trying rip money off of Sung Dowon and W&U, right?”

“That was how it ended that time.”

When my future self agreed, Reporter Song tilted her head.

“Then, are you saying the truth is… different?”

“There’s an incredible behind-the-scenes story.”

“What was it?”

“The mastermind behind all this was in fact…”

In fact?

“Sung Dowon’s previous company.”

There we go!

I knew it was like that. I totally knew it!

I felt a refreshing sensation overcome me knowing that everything fell into place as I expected. It was sort of like guessing the twist of a movie long before it happened?

Didn't this mean that even without my foresight ability my senses were quite good?

"That was Pure Star Entertainment? It's been so long that I don't remember too well."

Director Park asked my future self.

It was so long ago that she didn't remember? Pure Star Entertainment went under?

"That's right. Pure Star."

"That company had animosity towards Sung Dowon and W&U. So they acted that way to tarnish their image."

"Even so, to go as far as to photoshop a photo…"

"They probably never intended on revealing the photo to the public in the beginning."

What?

“It was enough if Sung Dowon and W&U believed them and followed through with the deal. Sung Dowon had a sex party with a married woman? If it was a tabloid, they could have covered it up, but they even had a secret deal to try to cover it up? That’s bad. If articles came, then suspicions would become the truth and they would spread in an instant. It was quite an effective method. Even if it was revealed that the photo was photoshopped, it would have already tarnished Sung Dowon’s reputation.”

“Ah… So even if they tried to explain, it must have left an impact on Sung Dowon. Since you said he was a top star, if his popularity continued, I should know of him, but the name is unfamiliar to me. I don’t even think I’ve heard of it before…”

“Hey.”

I came to my senses as if a light went on in my head.

“But what?”

“That…”

Yeah, that’s right.

Everyone’s interests would be peaked if there were articles exposing a celebrity’s personal life, but there wouldn’t be much attention about an article on their explanation. Celebrities with

bad rumors would come out to the public to explain, but there would still be people who believe those rumors.

It required tremendous effort to repair that tarnished image.

Then, to move this situation toward the best direction, I needed to stop it before an article comes up and before the incident becomes bigger.

When was an article going to spread?

A few days later? Or… maybe today?

“If you’re tired, quickly go home and rest. I have work to do so I’m leaving.”

“Chief!”

I hurriedly grabbed Kim Hyunjo.

“What?”

“I, about Sung Dowon’s incident.”

Kim Hyunjo looked around before saying.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard but act like you know nothing.

Don’t get too interested.”

“There’s something that’s a bit fishy.”

“Hmm?”

“The manager of Lemon Girls. Pure Star Entertainment, Sung Dowon’s previous company…”

“That bastard from before? What about him? Did you meet him again?”

Though I felt sorry about using someone as an excuse… No, I wasn’t sorry. He picked a fight with me on the first shoot for Next K-Star and kept staring at me whenever I saw him afterwards.

“When that person was picking a fight, he kept acting like he would get revenge, but it didn’t seem like it was solely directed at Neptune. Do those unethical bastards at W&U teach you to do your job like that? You’ll wake up to your senses once you suffer…”

“What? He said that?”

“Now that I think about it, it seemed like he had something up his sleeves.”

I heard that real scammers mixed 90% truth and 10% lies.

Well, what could you do if the person who got picked on felt that way? Were they going to open my head and check?

My heart was beating furiously, but I tried to keep as serious of an expression as I could.

“I don’t think this is something just the two of us should know. Follow me.”

Kim Hyunjo secretly clenched a fist once before getting up.

We got on an elevator and went up. During the short time it took to get to the 6th floor, I organized what I would say. Perhaps it was because of the adrenaline, but my mind was spinning smoothly.

Swish.

The elevator doors opened.

Chapter 28: The Calm Before The Storm (3)

I took a deep breath and exhaled. Perhaps it was because of the incident, but the air up here felt different from the lower floors. A heavy atmosphere took hold of this place, making it seem like I shouldn't breathe heavily.

I saw a few familiar faces in front of the CEO's office. PR Team Leader Park who was holding the doorknob, about to go in, and the balding management business director next to her.

Sung Dowon's manager, who I had met last time, had his head down like a sinner.

Then did this mean Sung Dowon had already arrived?

"Hey. You..."

The director let out a big sigh that seemed as if it could collapse the ground.

"Just how are to managing your actor to get into this kind of trouble?"

"I-I am sorry. That day, Dowon hyung told me not to follow and go home first..."

"So you just let him go and you went home by yourself?!"

“He said it was a private party with a few close acquaintances… I-I really didn’t know it was that kind of party…”

As if he couldn’t handle this situation, Sung Dowon’s manager’s lips were trembling. His face was already deadly pale.

“Director. Team Leader Park.”

“Huh?”

As we approached, the director became surprised.

“Why’d you come here? And why is that guy behind you? Are you trying to let everyone know?”

“That’s not it…”

When Kim Hyunjo transmitted what I said to the director, his eyes shined.

“It was a bastard from Pure Star Entertainment?”

“Yes. I thought it would be good if I told you so I brought him here.”

“Pure Star…”

The director pondered momentarily before looking at Team Leader Park and asking.

“Seems a bit suspicious, doesn’t it?”

“Very. Director should know as well. That company is a bit…”

“Wait for a bit.”

The director knocked on the office door and went in. I saw a few faces as the door quickly opened and closed.

Two men wearing suits, one was the bearded man from the elevator. CEO Baek Hansung sat with an incomprehensible expression.

And Sung Dowon.

He always had a bright, gentle smile on his face, but it was currently stiff like a rock.

“Haa…”

As soon as the director entered the office, Sung Dowon’s manager fell to the floor, pulling his hair.

Both sides looked like they were about to collapse.

“It looks like the legal team is inside... are they going to file a lawsuit?”

When Kim Hyunjo asked Team Leader Park, she tilted her head.

“I don’t know.”

Now that I thought about it, there were no talks about W&U filing a lawsuit against the anonymous man in the future.

Why?

Even if Song Dowon was a nationally recognized celebrity, taking a picture without permission, invasion of privacy as well as threatening, weren’t these crimes enough to shut him down? There were plenty of times when Hollywood actors would sue the paparazzi. If they just filed a lawsuit against them before the incident exploded...

“If we file a lawsuit, there will probably be quite a few who will rush here trying to dig something up. If this story gets out, we have so much to lose.”

“Then...”

“If we can stop him by giving him money, this will probably be

the best.”

Ah, so that was how they sunk deeper into the depths of despair.

A few minutes that felt like hours passed and just then, the office door opened.

Then the director pointed at me.

“Jung Sunwoo.”

“Yes?”

“The CEO wants to hear your story personally… so come in.”

The door of the office was opened wide.

“There’s no need to be nervous. Just tell us what you heard.”

Kim Hyunjo whispered to me while patting my back.

The moment I entered through the frame of the door, 50,000 thoughts went through my head. The benefits I would get after everything was settled well, the recognition from the company, a raise, a bonus, from those to the curses and disadvantages I would receive if it failed to go the way I imagined.

Either way, the door was opened and I entered the office.

Thud.

Team Leader Park who followed in behind me closed the door.

When I lifted my head, everyone inside the room, I really meant everyone, was staring at me. Especially Sung Dowon and the bearded man, they seemed to bore holes in me with their stares.

“I am Jung Sunwoo of Management Team 3.”

I cleared my throat before I talked, acting calm. Of course, my mind wasn’t calm at all.

No matter how courageous one was, if they stood here with my guilty feelings, their hearts would probably freeze.

What was really fortunate was that I saw the photo on top of the table.

The photo evidence was both the trigger and the key to solving this incident.

Figuring out I was looking at the photo, the bearded man flipped it over, but it was already after I had examined it.

It was because my instantaneous observation skills had improved greatly after I got my foresight ability.

Sung Dowon and a woman, whose identity was covered by a mosaic, were captured in the photo and the composition and background were enough to put him in a bad light.

“What did the Pure Star Entertainment manager say?”

CEO Baek Hansung was amazingly calm even in this situation.

I tried to answer as calmly as possible.

“He asked if ‘those unethical bastards at W&U teach you to work that way? You’ll wake up to your senses after being stabbed in the back.’”

I supplemented what I said to Kim Hyunjo before.

They say people get better at lying the more they lie, lies were easily flowing from my mouth.

“You don’t have any more than that?”

“Yes. Only… now that I think about it, it seemed that they really did have something up their sleeves.”

CEO Baek Hansung fell into a state of deep thought for a moment while the bearded man told me in a domineering voice.

“Hey. If there was something fishy, you should have reported to us immediately. Did you not know that our relationship with them isn’t good since Dowon left his contract with them for us?”

“That manager is known to come from a bad background. There were rumors about him threatening other managers so I just thought that he was trying to make me scared at that time. But if something really happened to Sung Dowon, then I thought I should let you know… I am sorry for telling you so late.”

“No.”

The director shook his head.

“It only seems like this because this incident occurred. It was normal for you to think that way back then.”

“Anyways… Pure Star Entertainment are bastards who could do this and even more. There are only pure gangsters over there.”

“It’s only a belief, we aren’t certain.”

“That’s that but…”

“And if they wanted to get back at us, why would they make

things so complicated? Since they have photo evidence, they could have just released it to the press... Who are the bastards who sent the photo anyways?"

Team Leader Park shook her head.

"They are a small internet news company called True Media, but when I searched them up, I could only find abusing articles. They said that they would never reveal the identity of the photographer. To protect their informants."

Completely pissed, the bearded man cut in.

"What informants, those paparazzi bastards. Lawyer Lee. How about we scare them by saying we'll file a lawsuit?"

"Then we said we would send them a certification of contents, they just laughed. They are saying that if we file a lawsuit, we'd be the ones who lose. If this breaks out, Dowon's image will fall and since it's an issue of ethics, if the marketing companies Dowon is contracted to invoke a cancellation clause, we might even have to pay up billions of won."

"On top of that, they aren't acting as if they are demanding money to shut them up. They act as if they are selling the photo to us and if we don't buy it, they might sell it to the Chinese press. They are quite familiar with this industry."

Huh?

Didn’t Director Park say that the incident started with the anonymous man demanding money?

Did… something change?

Wait. Was it that?

It could be that the final victor, W&U, had changed the story and revealed it as the truth. As history only remembers the victors. Since it would look more like W&U and Sung Dowon were victims if they said that the anonymous man approached them demanding money from the start.

My expectations would have to be correct… It would be critical if something changed right now.

“I am sorry. I must have been crazy.”

Sung Dowon said with a dark expression.

“No matter how curious you are; you shouldn’t go to those things…”

“No, no. At your age, you could be curious about those things.”

The bearded man consoled him, but his expression didn’t change.

“It’s not like there was an exchange of money, and it’s not like you did drugs or gambled. It’s possible that a few close friends came together and did it after drinking. There are tons of kids who do that.”

“…”

“But why did it have to be a married woman… And for the photo to capture you guys like that…”

Sung Dowon clenched his fist at those words.

“The photo only turned out that way, I never touched her.”

“Yeah. We believe you. We do but…”

“I don’t even remember her face very well. I didn’t even know she was married. I really…!”

“What’s important is that the photo turned out like that.”

CEO Baek Hansung cut him off. Sung Dowon, who was expressing his victimized feelings, bit his lips.

“’I did go to a sex party, but I didn’t sleep with a married woman.’ Is that what you’re going to say in interviews?”

“That… Haaa.”

“I’ll look into whether this incident has anything to do with Pure Star Entertainment, so just make sure that this doesn’t get leaked to the public. If they are a paparazzi with no relations with Pure Star, then we’ll just give them money and end it. If this is related to them…”

CEO Baek Hansung’s eyes sharpened.

I took a deep breath.

To be honest, I wanted to say this earlier, but because I couldn’t guarantee that the photo was 100% photoshopped so my tongue froze at that moment.

However, if I wanted to butt in, I had to do it before it was too late.

… Still, let’s not go all in and leave some room to patch things up.

I looked around and approached Team Leader Park, whom I was most comfortable with.

“Team Leader.”

“Yeah?”

Team Leader looked at me with an expression that read, ‘Oh, right. You were here too’.

“I saw that photo earlier.”

“Oh, you saw that? Please be careful... No, let’s talk about this outside.”

“But that photo, I think it was photoshopped.”

“What? Photoshopped?”

Again. Just like when I first came into the office, everyone turned their gazes towards me.

If I hesitated here, I wouldn’t be able to do anything.

“... You, this is a serious issue.”

“So that’s why I kept wondering about it and had come to tell Team Leader.”

“Did it really look like it was photoshopped?”

“Yes. Earlier, Sung Dowon said that the photo was taken like that, but when I look at it, it seems like it was put together that

way. How about we have a professional look at it before we take action…”

“What kind of bullshit are you spouting?!”

The bearded man flipped the photo and stared intensely at it.

“Aren’t you just saying that? Because we keep complimenting you, now you can’t distinguish when and where you can butt in… Where does it look like it was photoshopped?”

Honestly, I didn’t know.

However, Director Park from the future said that they figured out that it was photoshopped later and if it was a photo that could easily be exposed, Pure Star Entertainment wouldn’t have even started this.

“I don’t see any signs of it being photoshopped? Don’t tell me you’re talking about the mosaic?”

“You said that Dowon definitely went to the party. Then what was photoshopped?”

“No matter how I look at it, it looks real to me?”

Team Leader Park, the director, the lawyers and even Sung Dowon were huddled around the photo and mumbling.

CEO Baek Hansung silently looked at me.

“Jung Sunwoo!”

The director called me again.

“Did you ever study photography?”

“I never studied it, but I do have some interest in computer graphics.”

I was interested in it. Just, I didn’t know anything about it.

In Hollywood movie-making films, they talked quite a lot about computer graphics. I watched those parts with interest. Because they were interesting.

The bearded man stared at me once again.

“You really are talking because you know something, right? This is a huge incident with billions of won on the line. This isn’t something that will be settled with a ‘Sorry, I was mistaken’ later.”

The director gestured at me with a serious expression.

“Come here and explain properly. Does it really look

photoshopped? Which part?”

“It’s a feeling so it’s hard for me to explain in words…”

“What?”

“When you look at the photo as a whole, doesn’t it look at bit awkward?”

“It looks awkward?”

They looked back at the photo with their eyes narrowed as if they were looking at a Magic Eye photo.

“Hmmm…”

“I still can’t see it…”

Taking this opportunity, I drew in a particular person I had thought about beforehand.

The person who wanted to believe my words the most.

“Umm… Sung Dowon. Are there any suspicious parts about the photo?”

Chapter 29: The Calm Before The Storm (4)

“Huh?”

“That day. I’m asking if there definitely was a situation where your picture could have been taken...”

I chose my words carefully as I asked Sung Dowon and his eyes bulged.

“I thought the photo came out like this because there are cases where the photo gets distorted depending on the angle...”

You thought?

“It is a bit weird. I don’t remember being so close to this woman.”

My heart was swept away.

Due to Sung Dowon’s involvement, I was able to overcome an obstacle.

And, looking at his reaction, the chances this photo was photoshopped went up.

“Dowon. Mm... Is it not because you were drunk and can’t remember?”

“Team Leader. I don’t drink until I black out. Because I’m scared I might make a mistake…”

Sung Dowon said as he bit his lips.

“Though I was a bit more drunk than usual that day… My memory is clear. I know this is an emergency, but can’t we let a professional see like he suggested?”

Sung Dowon’s words were undoubtedly more influential than mine.

I couldn’t tell if those people believed in Sung Dowon or not, but either way, they were more seriously discussing the authenticity of the photo.

“Come, give it here.”

“Yes.”

CEO Baek Hansung, who received the photo, rubbed his chin as he mumbled.

“Photoshopped…”

Soon after, he placed the photo down and asked the lawyer.

“How much time do we have?”

“Not much. The other side is urging us to answer if we are going to buy it or not immediately, if we keep dragging it on, they might pass it over to someone else.”

Team Leader Park let out a sigh and added in.

“The national press is a problem, but if this goes over to the Chinese press, there’s nothing we can do. That neighborhood is chaotic enough to slap Hollywood in the face… If the photo is real, we won’t be able to handle what comes after.”

“Team Leader Park.”

“Yes, CEO.”

“Immediately contact a few trustworthy photo experts and request them to check the photo. Since we’re against time, ask them to do it as quickly as possible.”

Team Leader Park, who received the order, immediately picked up the photo and left the office.

“And…”

CEO Baek Hansung was about to say something before he looked

at me.

“Jung Sunwoo?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think we should do now? Tell me your thoughts.”

It felt like getting attacked suddenly while I was relaxed.

“CEO. He’s just a new recruit, what does he know…”

“I just want to listen to a young man’s thoughts.”

CEO Baek Hansung cut the bearded team leader off and nodded at me.

I gulped down my saliva. It almost felt like I was being interviewed by the CEO.

I could foresee what sort of turning point this instant would be in my life.

“My thoughts are… that we should wait until we get the results and try to drag it on.”

“If we do that, the deal might completely crumble. Even taking

that risk?”

“If this is Pure Star Entertainment’s trick, it might be leaked that we tried to cover this up with money. If that happens, there will be quite a few people who won’t believe the photo is fake even when it’s unveiled. They might think we gave them money because we had something to hide.”

I used what the future Director Park said as a background and added what I wanted to say on top of that.

And, to my surprise, it came out much more smoothly than I expected.

“And what’s more, they might be disgusted that we tried to cover it up and criticize us. I think that if we move hastily now, we might incur a result like that.”

“What if this photo is real and Pure Star Entertainment had nothing to do with it?”

Then, that would be huge.

W&U would be in big trouble and so would Sung Dowon.

And me… Let’s not think of the worst of the worst case scenarios now.

“Still, I believe if there is a possibility, we should confirm it. I think that it is better to take the risk now and buy some time to confirm it than getting hit by a storm that we could have easily avoided.”

I said what I wanted.

When I glanced at him, CEO Baek Hansung’s expression didn’t seem too bad.

“Impressive.”

Was this a compliment?

“Ah… Thank you.”

“Okay. You can leave now.”

“Pardon?”

The director pointed towards the door.

With a dazed expression, I bowed and left the office.

What the?

Though I did all I could before leaving… What did I have to do

now?

I tried my best to persuade them, but would my words be enough? Don't tell me they were going to continue with the deal?

The results of the photo were important. How long would it take before the results came out? Would they come out before articles were published?

"You, come here!"

Kim Hyunjo dragged me by the arm and entered the elevator.

"I was worried so I eavesdropped and I thought my heart was going to collapse. Is there really something wrong with the photo? How certain are you?"

"I am quite confident."

"Can you bet your hand on it?"

No matter how you put it, betting my hand was a bit...

When I didn't reply right away, Kim Hyunjo patted my back.

"Okay... Don't be so worried."

“Yes.”

“If you’re fired, I’ll introduce you to another company.”

Stop it, you’re making me more worried!

Kim Hyunjo had other things to do so he disappeared, and I returned to the office on the 4th floor and waited for the news. I didn’t think I would be able to rest easy in this state if I went back to my one-room apartment.

Also, there was another thing I needed to check.

I tried calling the acting teacher who criticized Lee Songha harshly. I needed to figure out what intentions he had by saying those things.

My senses told me there was something fishy going on here.

If the acting teacher had some ulterior motive and tried to break Lee Songha’s acting career by degrading her, then I could use this fact to convince her. Looking at her previous reaction, it didn’t seem like she didn’t like acting itself.

Then I just needed to show her the synopsis for Cat Guardian Angel and have to go to the audition…

-The person you are calling is…

Damn, just what was this person doing?

I left a message asking the teacher to call me and then organized Neptune's next week schedule. I consistently checked sites and searched Sung Dowon's name. As articles about Sung Dowon could have been published.

And not long had passed.

Now, even if they told me to do more, there really wasn't anything else I could do. When I looked out the window, I saw the moon.

So my precious break ended like this.

My throat felt dry so I went out to the lounge.

I stood in front of the vending machine, wondering what to drink.

Behind me, I heard female employees whispering to each other.

"Hey. Isn't this Sung Dowon?"

"What?"

“It’s an article that just got published, ‘Top Star A who kept a clean image… Recently starred in two movies, mobilized 6 million viewers, confirmed ticket selling power’… Read this. No matter how I look at it, it’s Sung Dowon. Does the PR team know this?”

I left the drink that was dropping down the vending machine and returned to the office.

I refreshed the screen with celebrity news and didn’t see Sung Dowon’s name in the headlines. Even when I looked at the popular searches, I didn’t see his name up there.

However, when I searched ‘Top Star A’ like the female employee said, an article popped up immediately.

{Top Star A who kept a clean image gets thrown into a humongous scandal?}

When I clicked the headline, it opened an unfamiliar news site, News777.

There wasn’t even the name of journalist on the ‘Written by’ line. There was only an email to their entertainment department.

I gulped down my saliva and started to scroll down.

There have been rumors that National Star A, who is in his twenties and confirmed his ticket selling power by mobilizing 6 million viewers to the theaters in two movies he recently starred

in, and a married woman had a sex party and are gathering the attention of interested parties of the entertainment industry.

We expect that the commotion this will cause when revealed will be as large as how much A has kept a clean, good-mannered image.

It really was Sung Dowon no matter who looked at it.

A clean image, explicitly revealing his viewer count, a national star in his twenties.

There was simply too much information to infer. Those who are interesting in the entertainment world would know immediately...

One related individual stated carefully that, “A is an actor who excelling in self-management,” and, “The reason why he hasn’t had any scandals until now was because he fully enjoyed himself in secretive places and had never been brought to light”.

An individual from the company A left rejected the scandal, saying, “No way. This is a baseless story.”

However, another news company has photo evidence, and specific rumors that they are conducting a deal with A and his current company are spreading, leaving many questioning the authenticity of the photo.

“... Dear God.”

For them to move this quickly as well as release the whole situation in one go.

Even the tabloids were very detailed. Seeing how they included the part about the photo deal, it looked like the person who wrote this knew exactly what was going on.

On top of that, what was this? A baseless story?

They had an interview with someone from Pure Star Entertainment?

Maybe this article was actually written by Pure Star Entertainment?

When I opened the comment section, there were already tons of comments.

-The hell? Trapped Sung Dowon.

-If you're going to implicitly reveal the identity of the person, then you should reveal who the related individual is.

-I knew something would explode about Sung Dowon one day. I heard from someone I know that he plays really dirty.

-I screenshotted you. Be ready to be sued for libel.

-Sung Dowon lived off his clean image and now he's fallen. Kekekeke.

When I searched even further, there was already criticism of Sung Dowon by name. There was another article. This time, it even included his initial by calling him 'Top Star S'.

At this rate, it seemed an article with his actual name on it wouldn't take long to be released.

It would spread like wildfire on social media and rise up on the ranking of popular real-time searches. If that happened, then Sung Dowon's image would drop to the floor like they said in the future... Finished.

I let out a heavy sigh and flopped on the table.

I was frustrated and dejected.

I sort of expected my invention would change things but was it going to end this way eventually?

Once they finished assessing the photo and the fact that it was photoshopped comes to light, W&U would start their counterattack, but what if Reporter Song's words were correct?

If this event was going to become a huge obstacle for Sung

Dowon’s acting career, then it was already spilled milk even if they tried to counterattack later.

What would Sung Dowon be doing right now?

He probably read the articles, right?

It was a situation where everything he accomplished up until now and his future could be completely destroyed. He was pale before so he should be losing his mind right about now?

When I thought about Sung Dowon, I felt guilty for not being able to change the future even though I knew it.

Was my judgment wrong?

Should I have used another method or asserted myself more aggressively?

“Haa, if only the photo assessment came out early…”

That was so regretful.

If the results came out quickly, then they could have ended this situation.

Of course the professionals wouldn’t be playing around. They

were probably late carefully examining the photo...

“Oh good. You haven’t left yet.”

“...!”

Surprised, I turned around to see Team Leader Park right behind me.

No, weren’t they in a hurry? Why was this person here?

Don’t tell me, they didn’t know yet?!

“Team leader! Right now, there are articles on the internet about Sung Dowon...!”

“I know, I’m the PR team leader and you think I wouldn’t know this?”

Then why were you so relaxed?

“I already finished writing a press release before coming down.”

“Pardon?”

“The articles being published now are being threatened by our employees, saying if they don’t want to get sued they need to

immediately delete the articles. Our press release will be published by a news company in a few minutes. Then the reporters writing articles right now are going to throw what they have out and write a ‘happening’ article with our press release in mind.”

I was dazed and confused.

So… what she was saying was that it wasn’t the end?

Instead, it was being handled well?

Team Leader Park softly patted my shoulder.

“Since we stopped a big accident, I wanted to let you know. I thought I needed to thank you so I came down. You really did a big deed today. If it wasn’t for you, we would have thought the photo was real and made a deal with those bastards. Haha, we joked and called you Lucky Charm, but you really are one!”

Wait! Wait!

“Then, the results of the photo…”

“It was photoshopped. We asked 3 professionals and it was unanimous.”

Chapter 30: The Calm Before The Storm (5)

Ah.

A sense of relief spread and my stiff body relaxed.

“I saw the articles just now and thought we were in big trouble.”

“The results came out not too long ago. The timing was really close. Because articles were published faster than expected, the higher-ups were having a breakdown. Any later and we would have had to fight with reporters on the phone all night.”

“So is this settled? Completely?”

“That’s right. How can reporters believe the other side’s words and take their side when it’s already been revealed the photo’s fake?”

Well, that was true.

I smiled without realizing it.

This meant Pure Star Entertainment fell in their own trap.

If things went as they planned and they released that they had secret dealings with W&U, the public and reporters would be doubtful no matter how much W&U explained the photo was

fabricated.

But now, it was the opposite.

The deal was nulled and the fact that the photo was photoshopped was exposed.

Even if Pure Star tried to tell people that Sung Dowon really did attend a sex party and that a married woman was present as well, they would doubt them. And these rumors with no credibility would be covered up like other malicious rumors.

Just what kind of expressions would those people from Pure Star Entertainment have right now?

Ah, right.

“Team leader, what happened with the problem with Pure Star?”

“The CEO and Dowon were supposed to look into it... No news yet.”

“Ahh.”

“Anyways, today’s event would just pass as a brief occurrence. Since it’s true Dowon went to that kind of party, nothing good will come out of it if the topic blows up even more.”

As I nodded, a thought suddenly popped into my head.

“Will it be okay to let a reporter I’m familiar with know about this?”

“Mm?”

“She might be writing an article about Sung Dowon right now. She’s a probationary employee.”

Director Park said in the future.

That she received tons of angry calls from Sung Dowon’s fans after she wrote an article about him.

Although the incident hadn’t spread widely and there was a high chance she hasn’t written it yet, I still wanted to let her know. She was the greatest contributor to today’s events as things wouldn’t have proceeded so smoothly without her.

Though, she herself wouldn’t have a clue.

“Sure. They’ll probably see the news release, but it’s better if you let reporters you know directly. She’s a probationary employee?”

“Yes.”

“You’re both young. Make her someone on your side. If you want to continue to do this line of work, you need at least one entertainment reporter who you trust.”

I saved Park Woojeung’s number the day I got her business card. I thought about saving her under ‘Director Park’, but decided against it in case it resulted in a misunderstanding.

The phone stopped ringing and I heard a tired voice answer.

-This is Park Woojeong.

“Reporter Park Woojeong?

-Yes, that’s me. Who is this?

“I’m Jung Sunwoo. The Neptune manager you met last time.”

-Uhh… Yes! Hello.

“Did you quit your job as a reporter?”

I asked because I remembered that she said she was going to quit, but there was no answer.

As expected, she didn’t quit.

-Haha, it'll take me three hours to talk about every single detail, should we start? Or would you like to tell me why you called?

"Then, I'll tell you why I called. I called because I was worried you might be writing an article about Sung Dowon."

No answer again. Instead, I heard her flustered breathing.

What the, was she really writing it?

"Please don't write it."

-Pardon?

"Sung Dowon's article. If you already finished writing, please don't publish it."

-I... Ha. I know Sung Dowon is affiliated with W&U, but you should know as well. I'm a probationary employee so I need to write what my superiors tell me to. I don't want to a speculative article without concrete evidence either...

"That photo evidence a certain press has. It's a photoshopped image. And of course, there weren't any deals either."

-What?!

“We request professionals to check and only now got the results. A press release will be sent as well. All the articles on the internet are going to get pulled. You could also be sued if you put up the wrong article.”

-You-you said you’ll send a press release?

“Yes. It might have already been sent.”

I heard her moving fervently and then her hurried voice.

-The press release hasn’t arrived yet and when I searched on the internet, there are no articles from W&U’s stance. Would it be okay for me to be the first to release it as an exclusive?

“An exclusive?”

-Please, please!

Would it be okay? Articles from other press companies would be released soon anyways.

When I looked at Team Leader Park, she nodded as if she heard Reporter Park Woojeong’s voice.

“Tell her to exclude the specific name and to write that someone from the company told her. That way, I have some leeway to work with. There are reporters who have close ties with our company

and if they hear that an exclusive article with an interview came out from somewhere else, they are going to grumble about it.

I nodded my head and told Reporter Park Woojeong.

“I can’t have my name released, so please say that an insider told you and could you just end the article as if it was just a passing occurrence. It’s not a good event and I don’t want to blow it even further.”

-Of course! Thank you so much! I will call you later, drinks are on me!

Beep. She hung up.

Probably frantically writing an article?

After making the call, I started to realize the fact that everything ended well.

As I leaned against the desk and let out a huge sigh, Team Leader Park grinned.

“Since I said my thanks, I have to go back up and face the reporters again. There’ll be plenty of calls after sending the press release. Oh, right. Don’t go home yet, wait a bit longer.”

Team Leader Park pointed upwards.

“You never know if the higher ups will call for you again. If it wasn’t for you, this incident would have been big trouble. I can only express my thanks, but won’t they have something better? Look forward to it.”

Team Leader Park left a meaningful smile and went back up.

Something good…

My head filled with agitated thoughts before I clicked the refresh button. It seemed the PR team was working hard as I didn’t see any of the articles I saw previously.

Not long after, an article from G-Today, the place Reporter Park Woojeong worked, appeared.

[Exclusive] ‘Top Star A’ mega scandal? An incident brought on by his popularity.

It seemed that W&U’s press release was sent to a bunch press companies because a few seconds later, three more articles with ‘Exclusive’ in their titles were published. Then, not long after, the ‘Exclusive’ title dropped from their articles with the exception of Reporter Park Woojeong’s. It really was close.

As her article was hurriedly written, it was only a few lines, but it contained all the necessary details.

The fact that a press company almost created a controversy by releasing an article without confirming their facts and that the photo was a fake. The information about how the truth was revealed after W&U sent the photo to three professionals to confirm. Also, that the secret deal with large sums of money was unfounded.

There was even a sentence about me as the informant.

What seemed to be the press release which showed W&U's public stance on this incident was added to the very bottom.

That they would request the cooperation of an investigative agency and take strong action against those who circulate or reproduce this malicious rumor.

When I refreshed again, articles about Top Star A had sprung up everywhere. There was more than a page worth of articles. Reactions from social media and entertainment-related communities were being uploaded as well.

-[Official] The photo that claimed to be evidence of Sung Dowon's scandal turned out to be fake. Where did the commenter saying that he knew Sung Dowon's personal life hide now? Please come out.

-He deleted his comment and booked it.

-Is there no way to make those bastards who enjoyed and

increased the controversy eat Gosomi?

Gosomi is a snack in Korea, but the comment is a play on words. Goso (고소) is filing a lawsuit in Korean.

-That's why we need to hear from both sides in cases like this before we criticize anyone.

-Poor Sung Dowon... I hope you think that this was just a mishap so next year can be great and forget about. T^T

-Wow, damn. Photoshopped image. Shiver They really have nothing better to do.

"It's finally over."

It felt as if a great storm passed by. Though it wasn't a storm that wreaked havoc in its path, but a thankful storm that brought me benefits.

I raised my head and looked up at the ceiling.

Something better... What would that be?

The first thing that came to mind were the words Sung Dowon said in that hazy future.

About asking me to be his manager.

Things went well, but what would happen from here on out? I could consider myself as Sung Dowon's benefactor, but did that mean that the hazy future I saw would become a reality?

And I become Sung Dowon's manager?

"Hmmm..."

I ruffled my hair.

Not long ago, I thought I would have instantly accepted if Sung Dowon asked me to be his manager. He was a top actor that I dreamed of being a manager for and the schedule of girl group managers was too exhausting.

But now that I thought this could be a possibility, my heart didn't feel relieved.

Because of Neptune.

If I accepted Sung Dowon's proposal, then would that mean I would have to be separated from Neptune?

Of course, since we worked in the same company, we could see and talk to each other anytime. But if my assigned group or person changed, that would mean they would leave my hands.

If that was the case, then everything from them getting first on a

music broadcast and gaining popularity, Lee Songha auditioning and getting the part as the interpreter, and even getting her to seriously walk the path of an actress.

All that would no longer be my responsibility and would fall onto the traitor, Choi Gunyoung.

That would be… unpleasant.

Very unpleasant.

Then what should I do?

If Team Leader Park's words were right, then it seemed that the higher ups would give me something. Should I confidently ask them to let me be assigned to both Sung Dowon and Neptune?

There were many cases where a single manager was assigned to multiple celebrities so it seemed possible. Sung Dowon already had a manager and Neptune had Kim Hyunjo. Well, though I didn't trust him, they had the traitor too.

Okay. Let's do that.

Since I was going to ask them anyways, let's resolve Lee Songha's problem too. There was definitely something up with that lesson teacher. I needed to handle him first.

Then, once Lee Songha could brush off her trauma and was ready to flip the acting scene on its head, I could ask them to support her a little.

Ah, though I needed to discuss this with Kim Hyunjo first.

Since they were having difficulty casting for Cat Guardian Angel and since they contacted W&U already, it didn't seem hard getting Lee Songha an audition.

What was important was what role she would get.

Vrr.

As I continued my thoughts, my cellphone vibrated.

When I checked who it was, it was Kim Hyunjo.

"Chief?"

-Are you still on the 4th floor?

"Yes. I'm in the office."

-Then come to the elevator right now!

What was this?

When I left, still uncertain, the elevator was on its way up from the basement.

Was it Kim Hyunjo? Why was he coming from the basement?

Maybe Neptune was still in the practice room?

The elevator stopped on the 4th floor and its doors opened. Inside was a slightly excited Kim Hyunjo. Before I could open my mouth, he grabbed my arm and pulled me into the elevator.

Then, he pressed the button leading to the 6th floor.

“The CEO is looking for you.”

“Ah.”

Kim Hyunjo gave me a strange look before saying.

“Looking at the articles being published, it looks like the photo was really a fake. You really did believe it, didn’t you? I first thought you were just spouting things with the ambitions of a new recruit and thought you were some crazy person.”

“I told you I was quite sure.”

“Hey, then why didn’t you bet your hand on it?”

No, that was a bit.

“Right, do you know what happened to Pure Star? If you even get that right, you really have something.”

“We don’t know about that yet.”

Although, I am almost 100% certain.

Slide.

When we got off the 6th floor, I saw Sung Dowon’s manager pacing back and forth. In the same place he was sitting with his head lowered like a sinner.

He looked at his cellphone once, then at the closed CEO’s office door. He looked back and forth until he saw us. His expression stiffened when he saw me. An unreadable complex expression passed by in a moment.

Nod.

We greeted each other, but the conversation didn’t continue. Sung Dowon’s manager looked back at his cellphone screen. I turned my eyes away from him and grasped the handle of the CEO’s office.

Chapter 31: There's Always A Twist (1)

Kim Hyunjo grabbed my shoulder just before I entered the office.

"For a new recruit, who hasn't been working for more than a month, to enter the CEO's office multiple times, you're going to be successful in the future."

When I simply smiled, Kim Hyunjo's voice became low, almost to a whisper.

"From what I know, the CEO, Sung Dowon, the director, management team 2 leader and team 3 leader... Younghoon hyung are inside. If there are any problems inside, just ask Younghoon hyung."

"Yes. Thank you."

I had a few meetings with the management team 3 leader in the past so I knew him a bit.

He was a refreshing and funny person.

"Then I'll be going now."

I left Kim Hyunjo and Sung Dowon's manager behind me and entered the office.

Like he told me, there were 5 people holding a discussion in the office. CEO Baek Hansung was sitting in the top seat, while Sung Dowon and the bearded management team 2 leader were sitting on the left sofa, and the director and management team 3 leader were on the right.

Because they had been able to overcome this crisis well, everyone was happy, except for the team 2 leader. He looked at me with unpleasant eyes.

Just what was wrong with him? I had never seen him before so why did he hate me so much?

“Oh my, if it isn’t our team 3’s Lucky Charm, come here and sit.”

Team 3 leader said jokingly as he tapped the seat next to him. I greeted everyone and went towards him. When I comfortably sat down and looked up, I saw Sung Dowon directly in front of me, smiling softly.

Wait. This layout seemed somewhat familiar.

I recalled why in a few seconds.

Last time I came here, I was too busy and the haziness in the office I remembered was too severe to make out... but now that I was sitting directly in front of Sung Dowon, I figured it out.

This was the office I was in the first time I experienced the faulty

future.

“Your name is Jung Sunwoo, right?”

CEO Baek Hansung asked me abruptly.

“That is correct.”

“Did you hear the results of the photo?”

“Yes. I heard from Team Leader Park.”

“I heard our employees call you team 3’s Lucky Charm. I guess we could call you W&U’s Lucky Charm from now on.”

CEO Baek Hansung, who had been complimenting me, suddenly asked me another question.

“Do you have a car?”

“Pardon? No, I don’t have one yet.”

“You plan to get one though?”

“Yes.”

Of course, I planned on buying one. I simply didn't have the money.

"Then pick one out. The company will pay for it."

"… Excuse me?"

Give what to me?

I looked at him thinking I misheard him, but the director added in while laughing.

"Why are you hesitating? You have to quickly accept when he offers you these things."

"Ah, thank you."

I was thankful, no, it was so abrupt that I became tongue-tied.

"But what are you going to do if he picks out a something like a Rolls Royce? Kids are scary these days."

"Then I'll have to give him mine and walk."

Light laughter sounded out at his joke.

Holding onto the photo with Sung Dowon and the married

woman, CEO Baek Hansung quietly said.

"What's more important than the fact this photo is fabricated, is that Pure Star really did have a hand in this. It's a relief we knew ahead. How shitty would we feel if we later found out that we had fallen for their tricks?"

As expected, it was Pure Star Entertainment.

So that was why he offered me a car… No. Let's think about that seriously when I have more time.

Then what would happen to Pure Star now?

Taking photos without permission, fabrication and threats would be enough to file a lawsuit. Recalling what Director Park said in the future, it didn't seem as though Pure Star Entertainment had continued to be victorious.

"Then Pure Star Entertainment…"

"Sung Dowon and I are going to meet their CEO tonight. That's a problem we'll deal with."

I was curious what kind of conversation they would have.

It didn't seem like they would simply talk to each other.

“Anyways, that’s my present. Dowon said he also has something to say.”

CEO Baek Hansung fell back and this time Sung Dowon turned his torso towards me. He slightly bowed his head in greeting before looking directly at my eyes and saying.

“You are Sunwoo, correct? I am really grateful about today’s incident. You are my benefactor.”

“Pfft, that’s too much…”

The team 2 leader grumbled, but Sung Dowon firmly shook his head.

“He is my benefactor. If it wasn’t for Mr. Sunwoo, I would have fallen for their trap and my acting career might have been over. So that’s why…”

The moment I heard these words I had continuously thought about to the point of memorizing them.

The faulty future had become my present.

“I would like Sunwoo to be my manager.”

Just when I was making my way through a torrent of complicated emotions.

The team 3 leader clicked his tongue and said.

“If it was anyone else, I would have said something about them taking away our good recruit, but I can’t resist our top star.”

“Sorry, team leader.”

“Oh well… Nothing I can do.”

The team 3 leader placed his hand on my shoulder.

“What do you think? Do you want to work with Dowon?”

“Ha, how frustrating. Do you really need to ask him?”

The team 2 leader cut in with a snort.

“Honestly, can we even compare Neptune and Sung Dowon? Even Jang Seomoon was able to become Dowon’s manager by overcoming multiple candidates. He’s offering someone, who hasn’t even worked for a month, a position like that. Who would be crazy enough to refuse?”

“Why do you have to say it like that? No one knows what will happen in the future. Who knows whether Neptune will suddenly increase in popularity next year? Neptune’s on a roll.”

I knew something for certain.

Even though they were both team leaders, they didn't have a good relationship with each other.

Although they hadn't started thrusting their fingers at each other, the situation was growing more heated. But there was no mediator. CEO Baek Hansung and the director, they were elegantly drinking their coffee as if this was usual.

"We need to wait and see to know if they're on a roll or not."

The team 2 leader added flames to the fire by mumbling those words. This time, even I felt angry.

"Huh, what kind of dogshit manner is this? Why are you pouring cold water on someone else?"

"Who's the one with dogshit manners? The guy next to you poured cold water on our Chaeyoung's next project. Chaeyoung is a sensitive girl, but after meeting him, she became even more emotional."

Son Chaeyoung's name was mentioned out of the blue.

I was wondering why this team 2 leader I had never seen hated me, and now I knew.

“We’re lucky things went well this time, but I have never seen anyone, who is as meddlesome as him, not mess up. It’s already uneasy leaving him next to Dowon… I’m only letting it pass because we need to find a new manager once Jang Seomoon leaves anyways, and since Dowon likes him.”

“Wow, this is why your nickname is Mother-in-law.”

I flinched while listening to their conversation.

It seemed that Jang Seomoon was Sung dowon’s manager, who was outside. If they said they were going to push him out and place me in his position, didn’t that mean they were going to fire him? Because of this incident?

To be honest, I thought that this was more of Sung Dowon’s fault than the manager’s… Since it was Sung Dowon who lied and left the manager behind. But the one who was blamed and chased out was the manager.

Of course, I knew that the relationship between a manager and a celebrity wasn’t as close and familial like in the dramas. Since they were in a relationship tied by business.

I was well aware that there were many cases where a celebrity would abuse their manager and that the opposite was true as well. I knew that, in the worst cases, they would even end up going to court.

Though I was well aware of it… This situation felt a little bitter to me.

Since I felt that I could one day end up like Jang Seomoon.

“That’s enough. Let’s hear what the person in question has to say. He’s unable to speak because you two team leaders are bickering.”

The CEO calmed the situation.

The office quickly became silent. However, I wasn’t able to speak easily. If I accepted, that meant I would be Sung Dowon’s only manager, and if that was the case, it would be impossible to be the manager of both Sung Dowon and Neptune.

I turned my head to tell the team 3 leader about my worries, but just then, as if he had read my mind, he said.

“Why? Is it because of Neptune?”

“Yes. It is an important time for them… Would it be possible to be assigned to both Neptune and Sung Dowon?”

The team 3 leader showed a complicated expression as he scratched his neck.

“It’s good that you have a sense of responsibility, but that’s a bit difficult. Dowon has a lot of overseas schedules. He goes to China as if he’s going to lunch and we are planning on going to Hollywood next year. Since he’ll be new there, you’ll have to be next to him on set. You won’t be able to manage Neptune’s schedule with all that.”

“Ahh.”

“Maybe if you had the experience of a chief, but you’re currently still learning. This isn’t good for you nor is it good for Neptune and Sung Dowon.”

The team 2 leader suddenly cut into our conversation.

“Neptune has another new recruit anyways. You can come after letting him take over. I heard that you wanted to be assigned to an actor. Dowon is the top within our company. You can’t even tell when you’ve hit jackpot…”

If I looked at it rationally, the team 2 leader’s words were right.

This wasn’t a choice I needed to think about.

A top actor who possessed outstanding acting skills and box office performance. Being assigned to an actor like Sung Dowon was something I anticipated and wished for the most when entering W&U. And I had already decided that if I was to change the present, I would choose the better future.

Neptune was a group who had potential but was only starting to get traction now.

Sung Dowon was someone who was considered top in the nation and was preparing to go overseas.

If I asked 10 people, 9 would instantly choose Sung Dowon. And the remaining one would be called crazy.

Excluding the things that were preventing me from making a decision... When I thought about the connections and experience I would gain overseas, especially in Hollywood, the moment I accepted his offer and how beneficial it would be to my future. This wasn't a decision worth troubling over.

But... why wasn't I able reply right away?

It felt as if something was clinging to my ankle.

"Haha."

The director laughed as if this was amusing.

"I never knew you would have so much trouble deciding between Dowon and Neptune. It seemed you've gotten quite close to Neptune in such a short time. Should we give you more time to think about it?"

“Ha, I’m at a loss for words.”

The team 2 leader hit the table and said.

“What more do you need to think about? No, we won’t force anyone who doesn’t want to. Do you know how many people would quit their jobs to be Dowon’s manager? There’s no need for more time, decide here.”

The faces of Neptune, especially Lee Songha who had only today told me her true thoughts, passed by in front of Sung Dowon’s face which was looking at me.

Then that moment.

The world flipped over, and the scene in front of me changed.

“Well… It’s like that.”

Director Park clicked her tongue and said.

“Though the relationship between Sung Dowon and Pure Star was originally bad since they both had dirt on each other, they shouldn’t have crossed a certain line… But once Pure Star’s tricks came to light, they had passed a point of no return. That slowly started to worsen until it eventually exploded.”

What did Director Park say just now?

Sung Dowon and Pure Star passed a point of no return? It eventually exploded?

I tried to concentrate harder than ever to decipher Director Park's words, but then she dropped a bomb.

"Sung Dowon and Pure Star started to expose each other and had press conferences which eventually led to both a criminal and civil suit in court."

"They exposed each other?"

"Pure Star did a lot of dirty things, but it turned out, they were both peas in a pod."

Oh, my god.

Chapter 32: There's Always A Twist (2)

"Nothing leaked because Sung Dowon had been carefully managing himself. When Pure Star started to talk, married women weren't anything special, he really had all sorts of different fetishes."

I felt like I was going crazy…

What was this?

So Sung Dowon lied? It was a lie that he attended a party like that for the first time out of curiosity. He had just been lucky to not have his photo taken, his claims that he felt dejected and that he never touched that married woman may also have been lies.

Wow… The back of my head tingled.

Why did I worry about him?

If this kept happening, then I might lose my trust in humanity or turn cynical. My soul had just taken a blow.

Still, how fortunate was I that I took a long time to decide because I kept recalling Neptune. If I accepted his offer to be his manager right away, I might have difficulty breathing right about now.

Did I have to consider this bad or good luck?

“So what happened to Sung Dowon afterwards? It didn’t seem like he moved to China either.”

“He did work on a few projects in China, but they didn’t work out. I’m not too sure myself. Since there were grounds to blame Sung Dowon, W&U had already terminated the contract before the whole thing blew up.”

“Ha. No one ever thought… Sung Dowon would end up like that.”

“Is it Dowon or Neptune?”

The team 2 leader asked right in front of me.

“I’m sorry.”

“… What?”

“I would like to stay where I am now.”

I didn’t hesitate as I answered and lowered my head.

When I looked in front of me, the team 2 leader’s eyes had widened as if unable to believe what he had just heard. Everyone

was looking at me with surprised expressions.

In fact, even CEO Baek Hansung revealed a surprised expression.

“Hey, Luc… No, Sunwoo.”

The team 3 leader came up close and said in a worried voice.

“You… Carefully think about it again. I think you might have made a poor choice because this is your first time making such an important decision out in society and because it all happened so suddenly. What’s at risk is too large to decide with loyalty and affection.”

The director added in.

“Yeah. Opportunities like this don’t come often. It’s no use if you regret it later.”

If this really was an opportunity that is.

When I was about to reply with a decent refusal.

The team 2 leader snorted.

“I’m dumbfounded. Dowon asked you personally and you kick him away? You can’t even eat when we spoon-feed you.”

When you're giving me something inedible, do you think I'll open my mouth happily?

I slowly calmed by breath and replied.

"While I do know this is a big opportunity, but maybe it's because Neptune is the first group I've been assigned to, I keep thinking of them. They are only now starting to take a step forward... I wouldn't feel good if I quit now. I am sorry."

I did my best to properly tell them my intentions with the appropriate etiquette.

When I looked back up with my eyes lowered, Sung Dowon was looking at me a strange look.

"Have you really decided?"

"Yes. I am sorry."

"... I wanted to work with you. How regretful."

I was regretful as well.

I thought that Sung Dowon had the potential to make it in Hollywood. For his outstanding acting skills to be buried by his dirty scandals... I was sad for his talent that had met a bad owner.

Sung Dowon didn't say anything else. Since he fell back, no one else suggested me to think about it again. Only the team 3 leader asked me twice more if I was certain. The team 2 leader didn't even bother to look at me.

I folded my thoughts on asking about Lee Songha's acting teacher. Although my senses weren't incredibly quick, it certainly wasn't good to bring it up now. It would be better to discuss it with Kim Hyunjo first.

The awkward moment hung in the air momentarily before I was asked to leave. I got up from my seat.

The team 3 leader whispered to me with a complicated expression.

"You worked hard today. First go home and rest. We can talk about this again later."

"Yes. Then, I'll take my leave."

I bowed and left the office.

I closed the door and leaned against it, letting out the sigh I had held back for a while.

Today was very eventful. I used my head too much that I was

exhausted.

Well, this was how I blew away my chance at becoming the manager of a top star. The notion of becoming a manager of a top star had comforted me when things were tough, but this was how it ended.

Although I didn't regret my decision, I still felt a bit dejected.

"Hey, you crazy bastard."

Kim Hyunjo said right in front of me.

"Aren't you a real crazy bastard?"

"Haha..."

I didn't know why, but I laughed. Was I really crazy?

"Can you laugh in a situation like this? What were you thinking when you blew Sung Dowon off....!"

Kim Hyunjo halted his agitated voice and glanced next to him. Sung Dowon's manager, Jang Seomoon, was standing there. Kim Hyunjo clicked his tongue and grabbed my arm.

"Follow me."

I followed behind him with swift steps and said.

“Chief, I have something to say as well. About Songha’s personal acting teacher, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek. It seems Songha heard bad things from her teacher, I think he might be up to something strange…”

“You’re the strange one right now!”

“But this is a really important problem.”

“And is your problem not important? Do you even know what you kicked away just now?”

We were talking in front of the elevator when we heard a voice behind us.

“Um, excuse me.”

When I looked around, Jang Seomoon was walking towards us.

“Could we… talk for a bit?”

“Ah, yes.”

I nodded my head. The elevator doors opened.

Kim Hyunjo sighed and got on the elevator by himself.

“I’ll be in the basement practice room; so come there once you’re done. Okay?”

“Yes.”

Jang Seomoon and I went out into the emergency stairwell.

Underneath the dim yellow light, Jang Seomoon was hesitant for a while.

I had met this person exactly three times before. All three times weren’t exactly under good circumstances. First was when he came into the washroom with Sung Dowon, he didn’t look at me friendlily. He had turned pale the second time. And I had almost taken this person’s spot not too long ago, so there was no way the mood could be good.

My mind was complicated.

Jang Seomoon sighed before saying.

“Why did you refuse? Being Dowon hyung’s manager?”

“Ah, because of Neptune.”

“I heard that… but is that true? I honestly can’t believe it…”

“It was mainly because of Neptune, but I also have my own reasons for refusing.”

“Ah…”

Jang Seomoon wet his lips and continued.

“Though it probably isn’t the case, but… if you were worried I’d harass you if you accepted, I wanted to tell you that you don’t have to be worried. Since it is a good opportunity for you.”

“No, I didn’t think…”

“And even if I don’t get fired, I’m going to quit.”

If I could, I wanted to tell him.

That this situation was a blessing in disguise. Although he currently felt like the world was collapsing because he would have to quit being Sung Dowon’s manager, in the near future, he would think he was lucky to be fired now.

Jang Seomoon roughly tangled his back hair and mumbled.

“How could I be fired so suddenly after all I did… Haa, fuck.”

“Honestly, I think Sung Dowon was more at fault…”

Jang Seomoon stopped momentarily before smiling slightly.

“You saw my team leader… no, the team 2 leader inside, right? The bearded guy.”

“Yes.”

“It might be because he has never been a manager before, but if something good happens, it’s because of the celebrity, and anything bad is because of the manager. He holds grudges so it’s best if you don’t meet him for a while. He probably never thought that you would refuse that offer so his pride must have taken a blow.”

His last words had a hint of joy.

“I was already thinking about doing just that.”

He nodded at my reply and added.

“And… What you said just now. About Teacher Shim Kyungtaek. That someone who took his lessons was criticized severely by him.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I do have something, it’s not certain, though.”

My eyes widened.

Since he was someone who had been assigned to an actor until now, he might know something.

“That’s okay. Please tell me.”

“I heard this when I had drinks with Chief Jo a long time ago. You know that Son Chaeyoung’s very emotional, right?”

“Yes.”

I knew it well.

But why did Son Chaeyoung suddenly come up again?

“Chief Jo said that he felt tired to death trying to soothe her since she felt wary and insecure whenever she saw new actors with potential. There are a quite of few actors like her. Since, as long as she does well, her company will promote and treat her better. She doesn’t want to share.”

“Ahh.”

“Son Chaeyoung and that acting teacher are close.”

Now that I thought about it, Kim Hyunjo said it as well. That the teacher taught Son Chaeyoung.

“Son Chaeyoung really follows him around, calling him, ‘Teacher, teacher’. Well… This is all simply my own speculation from what I’ve heard from others, and I don’t know if there really is something up with them so just take that into account.”

“Thank you.”

Because nothing was certain, I would have to check, but it did sound a bit suspicious.

I would have to talk to Kim Hyunjo and learn more about it.

“Then take care.”

“Yes. I hope Neptune does well in the future.”

We said our farewells, and Jang Seomoon disappeared down the stairs while I took the elevator. I went up to the 4th floor to get my bag, and when I was waiting for the elevator, my phone vibrated.

“Hello?”

-Mr. Manager. I am Park Woojeong. Is it okay to talk?

“It’s fine. I saw the article you published.”

I could hear her voice that didn’t know what to do because she was so happy from the other side of the call.

-That was my first exclusive article.

“Whoa, congratulations.”

-It’s all thanks to you. Food and drinks will be on me. When are you free?

“Umm…”

I thought for a moment before licking my lips.

“I don’t really have a proper schedule to schedule anything ahead of time.”

I hadn’t even met with my friends after getting hired.

-Haha, to be honest, it’s the same for me. Even during breaks, I have to be nervous and wait. If something pops up, I have to cancel all my plans and run over, so it’s a bit hard to set any personal

schedules.”

Ah, break. I suddenly recalled what day today was.

“… Now that I think about it, today was my break.”

-Pardon? But what are you doing now? There isn’t much time left.

“I know, right?”

We diverted our sympathy for each other with laughter. Hahaha.

When I hung up after agreeing to set a date when we had time, the elevator arrived at the basement.

Knock, knock.

After knocking on the door, I went in and stopped. All four girls of Neptune and Kim Hyunjo. The five of them were looking at me with the same expression.

Expressions wondering if I was in my right mind.

“Oppa! Did you really kick away Sung Dowon and come here?”

Im Seoyoung ran over to me and asked while grabbing both my

arms.

Next to her, Kim Hyunjo clicked his tongue and said.

“The girls won’t believe me. Do you understand what sort of unbelievable thing you did?”

“Is it true?”

“Yeah.”

When I nodded my head, Im Seoyoung fell back hesitantly.

“Really? You really kicked away a top star and came here? After kicking a national star?!”

“Yeah… Things ended up that way.”

“Thi-things ended up that way? What the heck! You’re crazy! Crazy!”

Not only Im Seoyoung, but the other girls were surprised and talking amongst themselves.

“I told you. He’s crazy. It was already strange he came to work during his break.”

Kim Hyunjo gestured towards me and said.

“I was able to sneak a peek, and that Sung Dowon, that top star, requested that he’d like him to be his manager with his head lowered. But then, this guy’s like, ‘I keep thinking of Neptune,’ then didn’t even look back and left!”

Chapter 33: There's Always A Twist (3)

"Oppa, you need to think of your future! The difference between Sung Dowon and us is too large!"

Im Seoyoung pounded her chest in frustration.

Lee Taehee showed a rare serious face and said.

"Don't worry about us and think about it again. It's a really big opportunity."

"That's right. Didn't you say you wanted to be assigned to an actor originally? Then there's no need to think. Of course, you need to say you are going to be Sung Dowon's manager."

Even LJ, who usually joked around, seriously seconded her words.

Even Lee Songha, who hadn't spoken yet, stared at me to the point my face started burning.

Staying amidst them, my complicated mind started to fade.

Even if I didn't see the future, and I chose Neptune over Sung Dowon based fully on my own decision... I might not have regretted this decision.

I smiled as I answered.

“I decided after thinking about my life. I didn’t get a good vibe when I thought about being Sung Dowon’s manager. And I think you girls will become bigger successes than Sung Dowon.”

The reaction to my sincerity was short.

“Crazy bastard.”

Kim Hyunjo shook his head.

“Haa, there’s no use crying over spilled milk.”

“Really? You can’t change your mind?”

“The opportunity has passed.”

Im Seoyoung was the first to flop onto the floor. The other girls and Kim Hyun sat on the ground as well. I continued to hear them say that I threw away my good fortune and came back or that I was a weird person for a while longer.

Then, after the situation calmed a little.

“I need to practice harder from now on… I’ll really do my best.”

The others nodded at Im Seoyoung's words.

The girls got up saying they would practice some more, and I told Kim Hyunjo everything I knew about Lee Songha and the acting teacher. I carefully mentioned Son Chaeyoung as well. When the girls joined in with me, Kim Hyunjo showed a serious expression and nodded his head.

"Okay. Younghoon hyung and I will look into this."

He dusted off his seat and sighed when he looked at me.

"You should go home today and rest, eat something good for breakfast too."

Okay, when would I go to work tomorrow?

"Eat lunch and come to work by 3."

"Really?"

I asked again because I couldn't believe my ears.

"Yeah. Since you did something big on your break. I'll look at your schedule this week and give you another day off."

"Thank you!"

Kim Hyunjo left while waving his hand.

After saying goodbye and turning around happily, I became startled. Lee Songha was standing right in front of me.

Ah right, I did have something to say to her.

“Umm, oppa.”

“Why? Are you hungry?”

“Yes. But that’s not it…”

Lee Songha suddenly bowed her head.

“Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“For paying attention to me. I am sorry for saying this so late. Thank you so much.”

“… Songha.”

Just when I was about to answer.

Huh? This was the second time today.

My vision changed, and I saw my future twenty years from now.

With no time to wonder, I heard Reporter Song's question.

"It's a question that I thought of after you said you don't know how someone is going to end up, but who is the first person who comes to your mind when you think 'I never thought that person would be this successful' back when you were a new recruit?"

I perked my ears because this was a question I was really curious about.

But while my future self was thinking about the question, Director Park suddenly cut in.

"Isn't it Lee Songha?"

Huh?

"Who would have thought Lee Songha would suddenly succeed in acting, especially in Hollywood, back when Neptune was only singing and dancing? No matter how many people say you never know which cloud it will rain from in the entertainment world, for Lee Songha, it was more like it started raining in a cloudless sky."

This was it.

A nail.

A certainty that my thoughts weren't wrong was nailed into my head.

My future self bitterly shook his head.

"That's the part I'm most regretful of. Songha started acting long after I quit being Neptune's manager. If I knew that she was talented in acting when she was young, maybe she would be a much more amazing actress now... I always regretted this."

"Well, since Lee Songha did start acting in her thirties."

"Even though it's no use saying it now, but to be honest, I thought this when I first saw her."

Ah... I could tell what my future self was about to say next.

Since I thought the same thing when I first saw her.

"That she should be an actress instead of a singer."

The next moment.

Lee Songha was standing next to me again.

“Songha.”

I tried to sound calm as I spoke.

“To me, it doesn’t look like there’s a problem with you, but a problem with the acting teacher, who taught you. I’ll try to confirm it properly so if you don’t hate acting…”

I took out the Cat Guardian Angel synopsis I always carried in my bag.

“Would you like to read this?”

Then.

“Yes.”

Lee Songha reached out with a smiling face.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt a stiff happiness in my chest.

Light shone through the small window in my one-room apartment and tickled my face. My pillow felt soft, and my blanket felt smooth; a smile crept up my face.

I felt it was worth paying my month rent for a change.

I stretched and got up. When I looked at the time, it was 1 p.m. Since I slept after 2 a.m. yesterday, I slept a ton. How long had it been? Maybe it was because I hadn't slept properly in a while, but my head that had been muddled from sleep deprivation cleared and my body felt lighter.

Yes. This was it. This was how a person should live.

An employee who leisurely eats brunch before going to work. It felt good.

I looked at the dusty rice cooker and thought momentarily. It was a pain to cook rice. But I didn't have enough time to order delivery.

Eventually, I microwaved some instant rice and set up my meal with the side dishes my sister-in-law brought me. The meal I set up for the first time in a while seemed a little boring so I chopped a few green onions and made steamed eggs. It was a sumptuous feast.

I ate with my spoon and chopsticks as I opened my laptop and began my daily routine.

The first thing I did was search Neptune and checked if there were any new articles about them. Well, there wasn't much today. Only one line in a news article about Next K-Star?

I didn’t only check entertainment news but also large community sites many people participated in.

Luckily, there weren’t any negative comments.

There should some reaction after the first broadcast.

Next, I checked the lineup for winter dramas.

I may be getting ahead of myself, but I kept collecting information ever since the day I received the Cat Guardian Angel synopsis, mainly on projects that would compete against it once Lee Songha got the part.

Time Slip and Mermaid out of Water were picked as the most promising projects out of the three public TV networks, and there were a few projects that caught my eye from cable and comprehensive programming channels.

Channels that offer all genres of contents. Requires a subscription to cable or satellite.

I was glancing through new articles, and a few headlines in the entertainment section caught my attention.

[‘Mermaid out of Water’ Powerful Lineup, Son Chaeyoung confirmed] [Super Extravagant Casting! ‘Mermaid out of Water’ released in January with Son Chaeyoung] [Will the promising project, ‘Mermaid out of Water’, revive the stagnated public TV miniseries?]

Ah, so she ended up choosing this one.

The article continued to by stating Son Chaeyoung decided to go with ‘Mermaid out of Water’ as her next project, that there were higher expectations and interest due to the popularity of the original and their extravagant casting, and that it was a promising project that might save the continuous line of disastrous rating of public TV miniseries.

Well, the results of public TV miniseries these days were depressing.

There were no projects that surpassed a 20% viewership rating in the summer, and it had come to the point where a consistent 12-13% rating was considered a success.

The stakeholders were all probably hoping for a successful project to come out and break this streak.

Though, this mermaid drama would go under after hitting a 3% viewership rating.

Not long ago, I would have been regretted Son Chaeyoung jumping into the sea, but now I was surprised by how much it didn’t concern me. The fact she told me to screw off was secondary, it was more because I felt uncomfortable by my suspicion that she may have played a part against Lee Songha.

Although I didn’t see it through my foresight, it didn’t feel good. If it was later revealed this wasn’t only a suspicion, then even cursing her to fail wouldn’t be enough.

I clicked my tongue and opened the comment section. The reactions were explosive due to the popularity of the original. It hadn’t been long since it was published, but there were already hundreds of comments.

-Whoa, amazing. Son Chaeyoung? January come quickly shivers

-Euaheuah so good T^T I believe in Son Chaeyoung’s Rocco!

-Is it only me who feels a bit regretful about the matching?

-It’s just you. Son Chaeyoung is an amazing choice, don’t pour cold water over it.

-Though there is a bit of a mismatch between their images, I believe Son Chaeyoung’s acting abilities will be able to cover it.

-It will be a success as long as they follow the original well.

For now, their reactions were positive and favorable.

I read other articles before searching Cat Guardian Angel. There were only a few articles about how strong candidates for the main roles were reviewing it positively before, eventually, turning it

down. Compared to the mermaid drama, there were far fewer articles, and comments were hard to find. It definitely lacked in newsworthiness.

I was looking at them seriously when my phone rang.

“Hello, mom?”

-Yeah. Can you talk?

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

Now that I thought about it, it had been a while since I called my mom.

-I packed and sent some side dishes and green onion kimchi. It’ll arrive tomorrow so put them in the fridge when you get home from work. You can’t leave them out for too long.

“Mom, you should have let dad eat them. Sister-in-law already sends me side dishes.”

-Even if we eat it at home, we don’t eat much. I made ginger tea by preserving it in honey so put some in hot water and drink it. So you don’t catch a cold.

“Okay. I’ll do that. And you and father aren’t sick or anything, right?”

-We're fine. How's work? I asked someone whose son works at a broadcasting company, and they said that celebrity managers have it hard.

"It's fine, it's fine. Even yesterday..."

I recalled something while thinking of something to say to set her at ease.

I didn't have the time to think about it because yesterday was so eventful, but didn't CEO Baek Hansung tell me to pick out a car? And the director brought up the Rolls Royce afterwards... No, let's forget about that.

Still, me refusing Sung Dowon's offer had nothing to do with it, right? Probably?

"... Mom, I think I'm going to get a car."

Though I couldn't believe it myself.

-Isn't it better to lease a place to live once you have the money? And buy a car later.

"No, I'm not buying it with my own money. The CEO of my company said he'd buy one."

-What?!

Well, this was no surprise since I wasn't sure even though I heard it personally.

Her voice was filled with worry and distrust.

-The company you work for, Double Ent…"

"W&U"

-Is it a proper company? It's not a place with strange scammers, right?

"It's a proper company. Mom, it's quite a big company in this industry. I resolved an incredibly important problem so he said he would buy me one. Don't worry. I'm not a fool, I wouldn't accept if something was odd."

I tried to explain the best I could, but my mom didn't seem to buy it at all. There was a 100% chance she would call my brother and sister-in-law for more details. My brother would probably call me later as well.

I hung up after hearing repeatedly that the world was full of bad people and that I should always be suspicious. By the time I finished my food that had turned cold, it was almost 2.

Now that I had become accustomed to it, I got ready in an instant and left my one-room apartment.

Maybe it was because it was a weekday afternoon, but the subway was quiet. I bought some limited edition snacks from the muffin shop in the subway station. I bought some because I was going to work late.

While waiting for the subway, I went on the group chat that I hadn't been on for a long time. Maybe it really had been a long time because messages popped up one after another.

They were from my friends I went to high school with who made me wonder if they were really my friends or enemies sometimes.

They were guys I met and hung out with constantly, but because I never went out after getting a job, they were all asking me if I was alive or not.

-I'm not dead. Just think I re-entered military service and forget about me for a while.

As soon as I sent the message, there were a bunch of replies.

It seemed like these guys were chatting instead of doing their work.

-Military? What? It's that hard?

-To be honest, you need to buy us food the day you get your first paycheck. I bought beef. I remember exactly how much damn beef you ate that day.

-Hey, don't you meet a lot of celebrities as a manager? Get me a date.

-Me too.

-Me too.

These crazy bastards.

I told them to eat well and to stop spouting nonsense.

It didn't take long to arrive at work. A big storm passed by yesterday, but things were running today like any other day. When I got off on the fourth floor, a familiar chief-level employee greeted me.

"Luck Thrower, you came?"

So this was the reason why I used Bokdongee instead of Lucky Charm previously. The employee called him Bokdangee, which roughly translates to Luck Tosser/Trasher/Kicker. (I think I might go with Luck Thrower..)

"Yes. Hello... Pardon?"

Chapter 34: The Moment Your Talent Buds (1)

I thought the pronunciation was weird just now.

Explained last chapter, but I changed it to Lucky Charm/ Luck Thrower (as in a person throwing luck away). This line is referring to how the raws, Bokdongee and Bokdangee, sound similar.

Did he call me Luck Thrower?

He wasn't the only one who called me this.

"Luck Thrower, you've come?"

"Ahh, he's that guy? He's team 3's Luck Thrower?"

People I had never talked to before acted as if they knew me as they passed by. There were even people who chattered from a distance.

What was this?

It seemed that I wasn't aware of something. Was it because the news of what happened yesterday spread? Someone tapped my back as I was looking for someone I knew to ask.

"Luck Thrower, you're here?"

It was Kim Hyunjo.

“Hello, chief. But what are you calling me? What is Luck Thrower?”

“Rumors that you rejected Sung Dowon spread like wildfire. There are no secrets in this goddamn place. Anyways, your nickname changed from Team 3’s Lucky Charm to Team 3’s Luck Thrower. As the guy who throws away luck.”

“Ah…”

“They say the director personally came up with it.”

My social image, would it be okay like this?

I was about to think about it more seriously when Kim Hyunjo hurried me.

“Let’s go down quickly. A film crew will be here soon. Gunyoung went to receive them.”

“A film crew?”

“We discussed filming an insert of the girls practicing.”

There indeed was a schedule for Neptune today. Since the Next

K-Star mission filming would be tomorrow, they said they needed a scene of them practicing to edit in later.

"But didn't we schedule it for 5?"

"They originally planned on filming another team first, but their local shoot is taking longer than expected and the schedule messed up. So they said they'd film us first before going to them. In any case, we're the easiest to push around."

Kim Hyunjo grumbled worryingly on our way down to the basement practice room.

"Ms. Jieun needs to push them hard. I wonder if she's going too easy on them in front of the camera."

Ms. Jieun was the vocal trainer helping us with the filming today. I saw her in a meeting last time, her face was cute, and she was really short. She had been a faceless singer for a few years before becoming a vocal trainer.

A singer whose face is not known. Only releases songs.

"Shoots like this are more effective than multiple interviews saying they practice for hours every day or that they try hard. Then viewers will think positively of them as they think, 'They practiced hard. It's not easy being a girl group.'"

I nodded my head as we entered the practice room. I saw the girls dancing and singing without the instrumentals in preparation for the mission. The trainer had her arms crossed as she watched

them.

I quietly entered and watched them practice as well. Admiration unknowingly welled up inside me.

Although I didn't have a good ear for music, Lee Taehee especially sounded amazing. It was to the point where it was amazing that such a rich and powerful voice came out of a slim girl who weighed less than 50kg.

Even as she sang while dancing so lively, there was no hint of her voice wavering as it resounded out. She even sang the high notes so easily that if someone who didn't know anything saw her, they would think it was easy.

While I was watching in a happy mood-

"Lee Songha!"

Gosh.

The girls immediately paused at their trainer's shout. Lee Songha, who had been called out, lowered her head while wiping her sweat.

"I'm sorry."

"If you're like this with your title track that you've practiced for

over half a year, how are you going to prepare for the other missions? Are you going to embarrass me? You are going out in front of the whole country, would you like it if people swear at me for debuting unprepared kids?”

“I’m sorry.”

“If you’re going to be like that, ask them to play a recording for your part!”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Fierce remarks that even made me, who was watching, flinch rained down on her. It seemed this hadn’t happened once or twice as Lee Songha vigorously lowered her head and repeatedly said she was sorry. I was worried she might cry, but I didn’t see any hints of that happening. Instead, the other girls glanced at her with sympathetic eyes.

No, but… I didn’t think she did badly enough to be punished so severely.

After becoming Neptune’s manager, I started to monitor music broadcasts of other groups, and to be honest, Lee Songha was average. With my biased perspective, she was slightly better than average.

She wasn’t at the level of ‘she’s really good at singing’, but it wasn’t like she was bad.

It only sounded like she wasn't very good compared to Lee Taehee, who was overwhelmingly good at singing, LJ, who didn't lose to others in rapping, and even Im Seoyoung, who specialized in dancing but was good at singing as well. Songha wasn't so bad that she would be called incompetent in other teams.

Also, she practiced so much.

How wonderful would it be if your skill could increase by how much you practice, but it was simply regretful that it wasn't so. If even I, who was a spectator, thought this way, how frustrated would she be?

"Oh, you came?"

The trainer, who had spotted us now, approached us with an awkward expression.

"Chief, are we going to start filming now?"

"The film crew will be here soon."

"What should I do during the filming?"

"Just do what you normally do. Like now."

Kim Hyunjo gave a satisfied expression as he nodded.

A few minutes later, the traitor came in with the Next K-Star film crew. They were the young producer and writer I saw during our get-together. There were also a film director and other staff who held boom mics and lights. As people came in, the practice room became pack instantly.

“Please take good care of us. We’ll only shoot for 30 minutes.”

The producer said as he yawned.

Then the film crew really filmed for exactly 30 minutes and left. It looked to me that there would be one or two shots of the girls practicing, and the rest would be the trainer pointing out their faults. It especially looked like shots of Lee Songha getting criticized to the point of turning to dust would be broadcasted.

I sincerely hoped that when viewers watched this, they would think, ‘That’s too much. She didn’t so bad to be criticized so severely.’

“Sunwoo.”

Kim Hyunjo came up to me as I was cleaning up.

“Leave the rest of the girls to Gunyoung, you take Songha to meeting room B. I’ll bring Younghoon hyung there. We need to finish our talk from yesterday.”

“Ah, yes!”

I was about to wonder when he would bring that up as well.

I passed between the completely exhausted girls, who were flopped all over the place whispering that they thought the shoot went well, and found Lee Songha. She was in the corner, lying facedown on the ground like laundry.

Did she faint?

“Songha.”

“Yes.”

When I called her, she shot back up.

“Chief and the team leader want to have a talk, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Lee Songha grabbed her bag and left. The girls behind her saw her off.

“Songha, have a good talk.”

“Come back soon.”

“Go tell the team leader exactly what you heard, you dummy!”

We got on the elevator, and I pressed the fourth-floor button.

Since we were in a small, contained space, I could hear her panting. When I looked at Lee Songha and her heaving shoulders, she looked like a kid who had come back after a sprint. Sweat dripped from her forehead, chin and even down her long neck.

Still, she never said that it was hard... I didn’t know whether to say she was praiseworthy or foolish. Or if she was resolute.

To be honest, it looked like her heart had it tougher than her body.

“Your vocal teacher was scary.”

“Pardon?”

“She might have been more severe because a film crew came today.”

I said these words in hopes it would make her feel a bit better, but she tilted her head.

“The teacher was going easy on us because there was a film crew.”

“… That was going easy?”

“When we are actually practicing, she’s 10 times scarier. Also, this is nothing.”

A thought suddenly popped up.

She was someone who could say that it was nothing after getting punished so severely and even 10 times more severely. But when she was getting acting lessons, she had become stressed and was having a hard time. To the point where she would be depressed while eating 3 servings worth of food at night before eventually quitting.

Fucking bastard. Just how harsh was he on her?

Although I hadn’t met him yet, the teacher was becoming a monster in my mind.

I left Lee Songha in meeting room B and brought the muffins I bought on my way to work. She probably had no energy after practicing, filming, and getting punished, so she should have some snacks.

“Songha, these are muffins, do you want to ea…”

“I will.”

“Okay. I bought it for everyone, so you eat one first.”

Lee Songha, who had pounced on the muffin box and was about to open it, paused.

“Just one? Are there different kinds?”

She asked while giving me a serious look.

As if she was asking why I was making her make such a difficult decision.

Nonetheless, I was the uncle of quadruplets.

“No, they are all the same. There’s no need to choose.”

“Wow. Thank you.”

Lee Songha acted as though someone was going to steal it if she hesitated and quickly grabbed one. A fist-sized muffin with walnuts on top disappeared in a blink of an eye. I wasn’t exaggerating, it really disappeared in a blink of an eye.

What the, did she drink the muffin?

Lee Songha picked up and ate the crumbs on the table as well, yet

she licked her lips as if she was still unsatisfied. She might have some talent as a food fighter. Since her looks were amazing, she could make easy money broadcasting herself eating food.

Reworded for flow but the author is talking about Eating Show/Social Eating popular in Korea.

“I bought one for myself as well, but you can have it since I don’t really like them.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Thank you.”

She was happy, really happy. It seemed it was tasty.

She was a girl whose expression didn’t change much, but it was good to see her happy expression when she ate. Although it came with a ridiculous price of 4,000won (3.38 US Dollars), and I would never buy one for myself, when I saw her eating happily, it didn’t feel like a waste at all.

Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader didn’t arrive even after Lee Songha had finished off two muffins. I was glancing at the door when Lee Songha looked through her bag, making ruffling noises. She brought out a stack of A4 papers.

It was the Cat Guardian Angel synopsis.

“I read… everything you gave me.”

“Really? How was it?”

The synopsis wasn’t much, but I asked just in case.

“The unnies said it was meh.”

As expected.

“I like it.”

“… Really?”

“I especially find the story at the end fun.”

Lee Songha flipped the synopsis and showed me.

An outline of the beginning plot of Cat Guardian Angel was attached at the very end. Although there were many synopsises with story-like outlines, maybe it was because Writer Hong Jumi was a romance novel author, but hers felt like a genuine novel. I, too, enjoyed this part the most.

“Which character do you like the most?”

Lee Songha flipped the page forward and pointed.

“This person.”

I was almost about to shout.

The interpreter Jung Haewon.

Lee Songha pointed at her.

I read the synopsis tens of times when I got it as well. I substituted each female character with Lee Songha and imagined which of them suited her the best.

And I hoped that if Lee Songha was to do this drama, she would choose the role of Jung Haewon. It wasn’t because of the information I received from the future, but because I truly felt this character was appealing.

Also, because it suited Lee Songha well.

Chapter 35: The Moment Your Talent Buds (2)

“Why do you like this role?”

“I feel sorry for her.”

She was right. This Jung Haewon character was pitiable and had a lot of thorns.

She grew up in an unfortunate household, and she studied day and night with the determination that she would succeed with her own power, got accepted to a good university and even used her income from her part-time job to study overseas.

She was a woman who would make one think that it was about time for the world to reward her for her efforts. However, there was one problem with her. It was that she would occasionally see what others couldn’t, ghosts.

It would have been best if she simply ignored them, but she was so afraid of ghosts that she would freeze on the spot even if she caught a glimpse of their shadow. She tried her best to overcome this fear, but it was all for naught.

Because of this problem, she eventually walked out of a large company she worked for on her own and met the main character while working as a freelance interpreter.

“You like this role because you feel sorry for her?”

“Even though she tries so hard, it doesn’t work out well and she has a difficult time. But since the drama ends with everyone happy, it must mean she is happy in the end.”

“Ahh.”

“I want to see that.”

She said as she carefully patted the synopsis.

“Then do you want to try Jung Haewon’s lines in the outline?”

I said passingly, but Lee Songha flinched.

It was the same expression she had when I told her to try acting.

Goddamn trauma. The acting teacher bastard. I won’t let you go, seriously.

“Songha, I don’t know what kind of words that acting teacher said to you, but you are definitely not bad enough to be called terrible. Do you know how many episodes of dramas I’ve seen and how much money I spent on movie tickets? If I couldn’t tell if someone was terrible at acting or not after all that, then I would have already quit being a manager.”

“Ah…”

“Try reading it once without any pressure. I’m the only one here.”

I tried to persuade her with my gentlest voice.

Hesitation slowly faded from Lee Songha’s eyes, and her pretty lips moved. While tension and silence hung in the air, I didn’t urge her and stared at the lid of the muffin box.

Then…

“I get your circumstances, but I can’t do it.”

Her voice was so quiet you would have to perk your ears to listen.

“First, I really dislike cats. Also, I extremely hate ghosts. I’d rather strangle myself than stick next to a cat ghost and interpret for it.”

My mouth opened without knowing.

Instead Lee Songha, who had finished off a muffin just now, I heard the tired voice of a woman in her mid-twenties, cold and thorny, yet unable to fully conceal the dejection and resignation in her voice.

You couldn’t say that she was acting properly.

In a quiet voice that you couldn’t hear if you were a few steps away, she had simply read a few short lines... But even then, it felt like Jung Haewon was sitting in front of me instead of Lee Songha.

How could this be possible?

If an actor acted in front of your eyes, would they all be like this?

Or was it... that I was witnessing the moment someone was budding her outstanding talent?

She looked at me as if she felt my gaze.

I jumped to my senses and said,

“Songha.”

“... Yes?”

“You’re good at acting. Really good. No matter how I look at it, I think that rather than dancing or singing, although you aren’t really bad at them either, your talent leans more towards acting.”

Ah, I did it again.

Unfiltered words came out due to my excitement. But it couldn't be helped because, unless my eyes were shit, really shit, there was no doubt in my words.

She was great at acting.

What would Lee Songha's acting look like once she was properly prepared? Even imagining this heightened my expectations.

"... I'm good?"

As if she heard some strange words, her eyes widened as she looked at me.

"Yeah. Really good. Don't listen to that crazy acting teacher and listen to m... Well, that will be pretty hard. I will definitely prove it with a different acting teacher."

Then I pointed to the synopsis again.

"Try some more."

She had hesitated before, but now she opened her mouth immediately.

I listened to the script I had almost memorized, her words filled with emotion.

Even as Lee Songha spoke her lines, she would glance at me as if checking my expression. That was why I maintained my smile to the point where I felt it would cramp. Since it seemed she was reassured by it.

The more lines she spoke, the louder her voice became, and even her expression became more vibrant.

Not a lot of time had passed when she finished her last line. It was regretful that the outline didn't have many lines for Jung Haewon.

Damn, I wanted to quickly get the script.

No, I wanted to push Lee Songha in front of the camera.

And it wasn't only me, Lee Songha seemed sad it was so short.

"How is it?... Do you like it?"

Lee Songha's lips subtly curled upwards as she held onto the synopsis with both hands and nodded.

"I enjoyed acting from the start. But..."

But?

“The teacher said that it was sad because my members were probably hoping my acting would be good and that I would raise our team’s popularity. To not get so hung up on something I can’t do and to use that time to practice dancing and singing… So I quit.”

That acting teacher, no, that word was wasted on him. That psycho bastard.

“Hooo, I am going to grab that man’s collar.”

“Hold on.”

Surprised, I turned around and saw Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader peering in through the meeting room door which had been opened by 2cm.

Since when were they there?

The two opened the door widely and entered.

“In fact, I went to talk to that teacher this morning.”

Kim Hyunjo wrinkled his brows.

“No matter how bad she is at acting, someone who calls himself a teacher shouldn’t criticize his students so severely that they become traumatized. I went and threw a fit, and he eventually

admitted that his words were harsh. We decided that he would personally apologize to Lee Songha later. And about him having other motives…”

Yes, this was more important than a spoken apology.

“His reaction was a bit suspicious, but since we don’t have proof, there’s nothing we can do right now.”

Kim Hyunjo clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction.

“Since he just claims that he personally thought she wasn’t good at acting.”

“Umm, what about any connection with Son Chaeyoung…”

“Since that’s a sensitive problem, we can’t bring it up without clear evidence.”

The team 3 leader replied.

“This isn’t a matter we can move blindly based on our hunches. The team 2 leader will protest and even Son Chaeyoung will make a fuss. We need some concrete proof. I’m not saying we’re going to end it here; I’m going to look into it further so wait.”

It would be great if my foresight gave me a hint at a time like this…

I thought before shaking my head. Because I gained a lot of benefits from it a few times, this thought kept coming up whenever I felt a bit frustrated. If I became addicted and overly dependent on my ability, it would become a huge problem.

Either way, I needed to look into it myself.

"First..."

The team 3 leader jokingly said.

"Songha, try to get good reviews from the public and show that teacher."

"Pardon?"

"To the point where you can say, 'I am not bad at acting, it's your eyes that are shit. So if you are going to continue being an acting teacher, first replace your eyes.' Do your best and get good results."

Those words meant...

"When I was looking from outside, Songha's acting seemed pretty good. Check if there are any good projects in the winter and spring lineups and start auditioning now."

This was it. It was sudden, but I couldn't miss this opportunity.

The moment I was about to show them the Cat Guardian Angel synopsis, the team 3 leader mumbled.

"I think Mermaid out of Water is the best."

"I thought about that first too. Since it is a project one of our actors is the leading role for... But because that person is Son Chaeyoung, it's a bit."

"Did you hear about anything else?"

"IBC's Wed/Thurs drama, Time Slip. That wasn't bad? The writer and director worked together on previous works, and they were successful. They say that it's a promising project along with Mermaid out of Water. But their reaction might not be good since Son Chaeyoung rejected them. Ah, Sung Dowon also has a drama he's thinking about. This is a 100% filmed beforehand so it will be release summer next year, but it's a huge project with a 150-billion-won budget. The competition for this project is the highest."

"Really? What do Lee Songha and Luck Thrower think? Do you have one you like out of the three?"

Put them away.

Please put all three away.

"I..."

I met Lee Songha's gaze once before pushing the Cat Guardian synopsis in front of them.

"Chief, team leader. Please take a look at this project."

Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader put their heads next to each other and flipped through the synopsis.

"Isn't this what Songha read just now? Is this also a new project?"

"You should have told us that you had already picked something. Where is it from?"

"It is a project that will be released in January by TVL. They are currently casting leading and supporting roles. The director is TVL's Producer Shin Taekyun. He possesses a good directing ability, and his previous work, Killing Me, was a mystery romance, and its highest viewership rating hit 5% and ended smoothly."

"Ah, I saw a few episodes of that. They were full of suspense."

As if he had become more interested, Kim Hyunjo examined the synopsis in more detail.

The team 3 leader nodded his head.

“If they hit 5% on a cable network, that’s good.”

“Writer Hong Jumi seems unfamiliar, what was her previous work?”

“Ah, is the new project produced in-house by TVL?”

The two of them rushed their questions.

I resolved myself firmly before answering.

I knew that this project would be a hit on cable, so much that it would be distributed in China and make the leading and supporting cast national stars.

However, this was all simply a future only I knew.

Dramas were a big business, and this wasn’t something I could force my way through by myself.

If I wanted to get Lee Songha in this project, I first needed to persuade the person in question, Lee Songha, and the two in front of me, Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader.

Fortunately, Lee Songha, who had built up a wall, seemed to be

almost persuaded. I only needed to make these two nod their heads.

The problem was that this wouldn't be easy.

"It's not produced in-house; it's a project being produced by Pan Production."

"Ah, it's subcontracted? Many subcontracts are flimsy so you need to pay close attention. There are many cases where they don't care about legal action and don't pay the actors once they run out of the budget. What else did they make?"

"It's a company founded by CEO Kim Panseok who had become independent after working at TVL. This is their first project."

"Uhh... Is that so? So it's new? Who's the writer?"

"She's Hong Jumi. She wrote two romance novels and received favorable reviews, and this is her first time writing a drama. I read her novels, and her writing skills are great. Her characters were well fleshed out, and she expressed her characters amiably."

Although I expected this, Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader's expressions weren't good.

Chapter 36: The Moment Your Talent Buds (3)

Kim Hyunjo frowned before saying,

“The problem isn’t her writing style. Unless they film everything beforehand, it’s certain that they’ll film later episodes during the project’s release, and the problem is whether she’ll be able to endure it or not. They say even writers who have written a few projects start to lose it when they don’t have enough time and start writing 1 or 2-page screenplays.”

I quickly threw in some additional information.

“Even if the writer is new, someone like Producer Shin Taekyun has the capability to lead them through it. I looked into it and apparently, TVL looked at the screenplay for a few episodes before green-lighting the project right away. Since the viewership ratings for TVL’s dramas, which had cast top stars, flopped, and many ended early, they probably planned this out carefully. Since they saw the potential, they greenlit this project and assigned Producer Shin Taekyun, who has proven directing abilities and a box office track record, to this project.”

To find any information that would be of use in persuading them, I had used my spare time, which I didn’t have much of, to research. I even acted as a potential sponsor and asked TVL’s advertising department and the production producer at Pan Production a few questions. It felt like I was filming a spy movie.

I hope this would help even a little bit.

I felt my heart thumping as I waited for their reaction when Kim Hyunjo asked,

“Did you receive something from them?”

“Pardon?”

“No, it’s not they asked for a different actor, there’s no way they’d give you something to get Songha. Why are you pushing this project so desperately?”

The team 3 leader scratched his angled chin.

“He must have come to really like it while he was researching about it. You know, there are occasionally times like that.”

“That’s true, but he’s suspicious…”

I flinched and let out a fake cough while turning away.

This time, the team 3 leader turned to look at Lee Songha.

“How about you, Songha? Do you like this project?”

“Yes. I like it.”

Whew, I lived.

I let out a sigh of relief. There was a huge difference in weight between me and Songha, who would be the one taking the audition, pushing this project.

While there were managers who would ignore their actor's opinions and bully them into doing whatever the company told them to do, that wasn't Kim Hyunjo or the team 3 leader's style.

"Really? The synopsis should be pretty good then. Then let's read it once."

"Cat Guardian Angel? The title is like a comic."

The two flipped through each page of the synopsis.

Looking at them, I thought... it felt very similar to that day I showed my mom a flunked test and was waiting for her punishment.

The team 3 leader and Kim Hyunjo's expressions turned gloomier as time passed.

Of course, I understood why. How many people would read that synopsis and think that that it would be a success? If there was someone else besides me who was certain that it would be a

success, I would definitely be suspicious that he possessed a foresight ability as well.

I mean it was a synopsis, the draft of your project, would it kill you to package it better? I even began to resent Pan Production's CEO, Kim Pansuk, and Writer Hong Jumi.

Flip.

They flipped the last page. Kim Hyunjo covered the synopsis and sighed. Then, a suffocating silence hung in the air for a few moments.

Kim Hyunjo broke the silence and asked,

"Hyung, what do you think?"

"What do you mean what do I think. What about you?"

"Your thoughts are the same as mine."

Kim Hyunjo stared at both Lee Songha and myself.

"I'm asking because I'm really curious, but why do you like this? Did you pick a project that you thought you would have a higher chance at getting cast in because you won't be cast for other projects? If not, I don't really understand? Songha, what do you like about this synopsis?"

Lee Songha stared vacantly at Kim Hyunjo and said,

“It’s fun.”

Kim Hyunjo sighed once more.

“… What I’m saying is, why, how is this fun?”

“I like the role of Jung Haewon. I’m also curious what will happen next.”

“If you’re curious, you can just watch it later.”

“Ah.”

You can’t be persuaded like that!

“Still… I want to try it. If I’m going to audition, I like this role, oppa. I like this, team leader.”

Fortunately, it seemed Lee Songha was determined. She clearly expressed her opinion while looking at the team leader.

I fully prepared a reply as well. Damn, my heart felt like a rollercoaster for some time now.

“Luck Thrower, how about…”

Kim Hyunjo was about to ask before he narrowed his eyes.

“You. Don’t say anything if you’re going to bring up your senses.”

“Senses?”

When the team 3 leader felt something was odd, Kim Hyunjo gestured at me with his chin.

“Hyung, he rejected Sung Dowon because of bad vibes. I can’t trust his senses anymore.”

“I was going to bring that up once we were done talking about Songha… bad vibes? You get stranger the more I see you.”

Should I have not said anything about my senses?

They talked between each other with me as their topic and soon, Kim Hyunjo asked me again,

“Yeah, why are you so stubborn about this project?”

“Because I think this is a good project. And that’s why I showed it to Songha. I watched all the director’s previous works, and he is

very good at directing. Although the synopsis is a bit bland, I felt that it was well-written."

Though I heard this from the future.

When I recalled how the PR team's employee said that 'the script was everything,' and 'the drama was the writer's playground', I assumed it was okay to believe that the fact that the script was good was a fact. Also, TVL's drama department employees wouldn't have greenlit a low-quality screenplay from a new writer.

Even I would have hesitated about putting Lee Songha in this project if the drama succeeded due to the actors or another complicated reason.

Since I may change the future by putting Lee Songha in there.

However, if it was a drama that became a hit because of its screenplay, I judged that the drama wouldn't fail because one of its supporting actors was switched out. Unless that actor was so terrible at acting that the quality of the drama fell.

"Then let's see the screenplay."

The team 3 leader nodded his head and said,

"Hyunjo, you go get the screenplay. If the screenplay's good, let's look into getting an audition. No matter how much you like it, it's better to audition for a role you would be good at. It will increase

your chance at getting cast, and it will be easier to understand the character if you do get cast."

"Well... okay. Still, you never know, so Songha, you read other synopses as well."

Kim Hyunjo nodded his head then clicked his tongue.

"But, that CEO of Pan Production is quite frustrating."

"Sorry?"

Frustrating?

"You said this is his first project after becoming independent from TVL. Then he must be using all his connections for this, but why would he take the risk with a new writer? It would be safer if he used an experienced one."

Now that I thought about it, I was curious as well.

I knew that Writer Hong Jumi was skilled so I wasn't worried about it flopping, but with what confidence did CEO Kim Pansuk decide to use a new writer for their first project that would decide the future of their production?

*

“People are probably saying I’m insane, right?”

He was the CEO of Pan Production. Kim Pansuk mumbled with his large figure squeezed into a small metal chair. The production producer, Park Sookyung, who was sitting in front of him and looking at her notebook screen, fixed her glasses and glanced at him.

CEO Kim Pansuk’s eyes were shaking uneasily.

“No, still, just wait until the first episode is released. When they see it, I know they’ll be like, ‘Ah, so that’s why Kim Pansuk brought a new writer in for this critical time’. I’m not uneasy in the slightest. There’s no reason to be. Since I believe in Writer Hong Jumi’s skills.”

“CEO, if you’re not uneasy, then please stop shaking your leg. My notebook is shaking.”

“What?”

When CEO Kim Pansuk, who had a threatening figure, widened his eyes and stared at her. Park Sookyung stealthily avoided his gaze.

CEO Kim Pansuk groaned as he said.

“If this fails, I’m screwed. I used all my personal connections on this project. If this fails, I don’t have a second chance. It’ll be good,

right? The screenplay is good, and even though Shin Taekyun, that bastard, looks a little flimsy, his skills are certain. Right? It'll be good, right?"

"Why are you asking me..."

"For someone who's the production producer, you don't have confidence in your project? Worrying is something I, who pays the salaries, do, and you should be working with the certainty that it'll be good!"

"Yes. This project will be really good. It will be a hit."

"A hit? We can't even cast our leading roles!"

"..."

That moment, they heard a knock, and two people came in.

Writer Hong Jumi, who looked to be about half the size of CEO Kim Pansuk, and Director Shin Taekyun, a man with messy hair like a bird's nest who looked to be in his thirties.

"Hello, senior."

"CEO... we're here."

“Ah, Director Shin. Writer Hong. Welcome.”

CEO Kim Pansuk quickly crossed his legs and said calmly. After saying hello to Park Sookyung, Writer Hong Jumi sat down and wriggled her fingers.

“Umm... I heard some loud noises from outside, is there a problem?”

“What? The screenplay is great; what problems would we have? Writer Hong, you don’t need to worry at all, just trust me and follow along. Just write good screenplays from now on. Screenplays. Is the next episode done?”

“Yes. The first draft is done, and I was revising it together with the director.”

“While the screenplays are fine; the problem is the cast.”

Director Shin scratched his head.

“They are creating a fuss up there, telling me to quickly cast people. If we keep pushing casting back, we might lose the green light.”

At his words, the expressions of the people gathered in the meeting room grew dark.

Park Sookyung let out a sigh and said.

“All because Lim Joowon fell through…”

“Haa, what can we do when he’s hurt? We were rejected by Kim Yeonsung and Park Hyemin. There are so many actors in Korea, but are there none who will be our lead? We need to quickly find a lead so we can cast our supporting roles as well… Should we lower our standards a little?”

Director Shin shook his head at CEO Kim Pansuk’s words.

“The project from GTBN that’s running at the same time as us, they apparently got Kim Yeonsung.”

“What? That Big Bear Production or something?!”

“Yes. Because of that, the guys up there are telling us to cast someone at Kim Yeonsung’s level. Even if they leave the projects from the three public TV networks out of the discussion, they said they didn’t want to fall behind GTBN, their competitor.”

“Kim Yeonsung, that guy, said he wouldn’t do cable dramas, but he went there? How did Big Bear get him?”

“40 million won per episode. They said they’d pay in advance once he signed the contract.”

“40 million per episode and it’s a 20-episode project... that’s 800 million won. They spent that right away? They have that much money?”

“They probably calculated overseas selling rights and other stuff and thought that giving him 800 million in advance was still worth it since he quite well received in China.”

“Argh...”

Kim Pansuk was about to grab his forehead when he became conscious of Writer Hong Jumi and simply coughed.

“It’s okay. Our screenplay is good!”

“They say the other side’s screenplay is good as well.”

Park Sookyung mumbled.

While the atmosphere of the meeting room had turned suffocating and heavy, the door opened, accompanied by a knock.

“Umm, CEO.”

The youngest producer of Pan Production’s production department hesitated before coming in.

“What?”

“We received a call.”

“We’re in the middle of a meeting… Haa, where is it from?”

“W&U.”

CEO Kim Pansuk paused.

“W&U?”

“Yes.”

“The one with CEO Baek Hansung? That W&U with Sung Dowon, Park Sohyun, and Son Chaeyoung?”

“Uhh, yes. I think that is the one.”

CEO Kim Pansuk kicked his chair as he abruptly stood up.

Chapter 37: When An Unexpected Event Occurs (1)

The weather was unusual.

I looked at the sky a few times during the car ride to our destination. The sky was gloomy without a single ray of sunshine since morning, and now, dark clouds had gathered to cover the sky in a dark gray color.

“Do you think it will rain today?”

It didn’t matter if it was any other day, but we had an outdoor schedule today so it mattered very much.

The traitor, who was in the driver’s seat, shrugged.

“Don’t know, there wasn’t anything in the morning about it raining today. Check again.”

I checked the daily forecast app again. It still only showed a cloud icon. The chance of precipitation was low as well, and it indicated that the clouds would disperse and that it would be sunny in an hour.

Was I too worried?

When I was about to put away my cellphone, it vibrated.

“Hello?”

-I am the youngest writer from the Hope Campaign. When do you think you will arrive?

“We are entering the parking lot right now.”

The writer said she would come find us before hanging up.

The schedule we were going to was a live broadcast for a sharing campaign, and they had asked Neptune to perform a song. We troubled over the decision because it overlapped with Next K-Star, but we eventually agreed because there weren’t many chances to broadcast their performance on a public TV network.

“Girls, we’re he…”

I shut my mouth when I saw the situation behind me. They had nodded their heads sleepily when we were on the highway, but now they were all sleeping like logs, wrapped in blankets with their heads resting on each other’s heads and shoulders.

Since their makeup artists and stylists were also dozing off, the traitor and I got out first. As soon as I went out, the cold air seemed to scratch my neck as it passed by.

Brr, it’s cold.

Soon after, a woman ran towards us. Looking at how she had an official badge and a headset-style wireless intercom, it seemed she was the youngest writer who had called just now.

“Hello! Are you Neptune?”

“Yes, that’s right. Hello.”

“There’s a stage rehearsal in 30 minutes. Neptune will be on second.”

The traitor cut in and asked,

“We have a Next K-Star recording in the afternoon so we need to go immediately. There won’t be any delays or anything like that, right?”

“Of course not, it’s a live broadcast. It will be over after an hour broadcast.”

“Okay.”

“Then I will lead you to the waiting room. The members are…”

It was too cold outside. If even I, who was dressed warmly, was cold, the girls, who were wearing their stage outfits that exposed their arms and legs, would shiver intensely if they came out.

As if he thought the same thing, the traitor showed a friendly smile and said,

“The girls are sleeping right now. Would it be okay if we let them wait inside the van?”

“Ah, of course! You can do that.”

The youngest writer readily nodded her head. Something suddenly crossed my mind so I asked,

“Ms. Writer, the weather looks uneasy; will it be fine? It’s an outdoor performance.”

“The weather was supposed to be good today, but it’s like this. We contacted the weather center and they said there will be no problems. Don’t worry.”

Yeah, let’s trust the weather center.

After we decided to wake the girls in 10 minutes and were about to send Kim Hyunjo a text that we arrived,

“Why didn’t you go?”

The traitor asked abruptly.

“You said it on your first day. That you weren’t interested in being an idol manager and that you honestly wanted to be a manager for an actor. That you would immediately transfer if there was a chance to switch to the actor team.”

I did say that.

“But why didn’t you go? When he wasn’t an unknown actor but Sung Dowon?”

The traitor asked again.

I took a moment to choose my words. Perhaps it was because I had set up a wall, but my thought would become complicated whenever we talked.

What was he thinking now, what motives does he have by asking this, maybe he’s trying to do something, maybe, maybe. Thoughts like these continuously entered my mind.

“I kept thinking of Neptune when I thought about switching. Like you said then, now that I’ve experienced it, it’s not bad being assigned to the idol team. And I also had some personal circumstances.”

“Circumstances? What, that you didn’t get a good vibe?”

“What?”

I looked to my side. The traitor was looking at me.

“You know.”

With an undecipherable expression, he opened his mouth.

“I have something I want to ask you…”

It was then.

He stopped what he was about to say and looked up at the sky. I hurriedly looked up as well. The sky was much darker than before. It was completely covered with dark clouds. As if it would rain any second.

Then -drip-cold water dripped onto my forehead.

Damn, it’s raining!

I ran around in the cold rain, looking for the youngest writer. She wouldn’t answer her phone so I wandered for a long time before finding her behind the stage. When I looked closer, she was talking to a man in a raincoat.

“Producer, should we continue?”

“Didn’t you hear what the department manager said? Since we don’t have enough time before the broadcast to change the cue sheets, he says to go as planned!”

“What do we do if it continues to rain once we’re live? What about the singers’ performances?”

“The studio control booth contacted the weather center, and they say it will pass soon!”

That damn weather center, didn’t they say there weren’t going to be any problems a little while ago?

I called after the youngest writer who was about to run off somewhere.

“Ms. Writer!”

“Ah, Mr. Manager. I was just about to call you, but the rehearsal might be slightly delayed.”

“If the rain doesn’t stop, what other alternatives…”

The youngest writer showed an awkward expression at my words.

“If it was a recorded broadcast, we can just wait a little before

continuing, but since this is a live broadcast, I think it might continue as it is."

"Could you put tarps up on the stage?"

"Ah, please wait, I'll ask. Producer!"

The youngest writer ran to the male producer she was talking to previously and asked. Soon after, the producer let out a sigh and walked towards me.

"Are you the chief... who's in charge of Neptune?"

"I'm their manager."

"Ah... If we cover the stage, it looks messy on the jib camera. The department manager cares a lot about the picture, so that's a problem we'll have to think about in the worst case scenario. Since it's not that bad now."

It's not that bad now?

"However, the studio will tell the MCs to comment about how Neptune showed a passionate performance even though it's raining. If we broadcast something like this, it could become a hot topic so please bear with it."

The producer didn't even bother to wait for my reply as he

hurriedly ran off.

I let out a sigh instead of what was boiling up inside. The youngest writer read my mood and cautiously said,

“First, we’ll get you some umbrellas and raincoats, and I’ll try to find some towels as well. And let’s refrain from dancing too hard…”

Eventually, all I was left with were 4 transparent umbrellas and a few raincoats in my hand. When I returned to the parking lot and got into the car with these in hand, the traitor and the girls, who were chatting noisily, turned to look at me at the same time.

Im Seoyoung’s eyes widened.

“Oppa! Why would you get wet when you’re holding 4 umbrellas!”

“I was already wet so it didn’t matter.”

“Ah, we don’t have any towels… Use this to wipe off.”

Im Seoyoung handed me the blanket she had covered herself with.

“Thanks.”

As I dried my hair that was dripping with water, I asked the traitor,

“They say they are going to continue even if it rains. Did you contact the chief?”

“He said we can’t do anything since it’s a live broadcast. He said that they cannot get hurt and to minimize their dancing.”

Their words were similar. Worried, I looked towards the girls, but they had calm expressions.

“Of course we need to do it since we’re going on air. It’s not like it’s a typhoon.”

“We just need to be careful not to fall.”

“Oppa, there are a lot of times when we perform in the rain.”

They all nodded their heads as if there was no problem. I concealed my uneasiness and looked out the window. Thick raindrops knocked heavily on the window.

Only after the scheduled time had long since passed did they begin the rehearsal.

While the solo artist was rehearsing first, we waited, gathered under a tarp next to the stage. The solo artist had an umbrella and

was wearing a raincoat as he rehearsed leisurely. His manager who was watching him looked calm as well.

Well, since he didn't have any big actions and could simply sing while standing.

"They say he's going to perform with an umbrella, how about we have umbrellas as well"

I asked, in case umbrellas could be okay even if raincoats weren't, but Lee Taehee firmly shook her head.

"It's more dangerous if we hold an umbrella in one hand and a mic in the other. The umbrella takes up a lot of space so our movements will become tangled, and the moment we slip up, it'll become a mess. No matter what kind of circumstances we're in, there are people watching us on TV, and this isn't professional."

"Oppa, we'll be careful so don't worry!"

"It seems like the rain is starting stop anyways."

Since the other girls were like this as well, there was nothing I could say.

Soon after, the solo artist finished his performance, and the youngest writer gave the signal.

“Neptune, please go up now!”

“Yes!”

The girls walked out into the rain.

Once they got into position on the stage, the MR of their title track flowed out. I gulped down my dry saliva as I observed the stage. Although the rain had died down compared to before, the girls were completely soaked by the time they sang half their song. They danced in risky high heels, energetically moving on the wet stage.

However, since the people who were wandering around the plaza were hiding from the rain in various places, almost no one was paying attention to them. Only the cameras in front of the stage were working hard to film them.

The song was almost over. When I relaxed, thinking the rehearsal would end with no problems.

The rain started to fall crazily.

Wasn’t this dangerous?

At this point, it wasn’t a problem of getting wet, but their vision would get hazy. If the rain dripped into their eyes, it would become difficult to see. Just when I was wondering… how they could dance in these conditions.

"…!"

Lee Songha, who was spinning on top of the stage, suddenly staggered and fell.

My heart plummeted. I was about to run up, but Lee Songha stood right back up like a roly-poly toy. Then she continued to dance.

Was she okay? Was she okay?

My heart was agitated, but fortunately, the song ended without any additional accidents. I covered the girls coming down from the stage with blankets and led them to the tarp. When we returned, they all surrounded Lee Songha.

"Songha, are you okay? Did you get hurt?

"Yeah, it looked like you fell pretty hard."

"Don't you need to go to the hospital?"

Lee Songha moved both her legs vigorously and shook her head.

"I'm okay. It's fine. I can do it."

It felt like she would protest if we didn’t let her on stage.

“You might be too agitated to feel it right now. Sit down, let’s have a look.”

I sat her down on a chair and checked her ankle. Although I wasn’t an expert, it luckily looked fine on the outside. She didn’t look to be in pain when I grabbed it a bit hard, and there didn’t seem to be any wounds on her leg either.

“It does seem to be fine… That was close.”

“I lost my balance when the rain got in my eyes.”

“Tell me right away if you’re hurt.”

“Yes.”

Lee Songha nodded with a blanket wrapped around her.

The rehearsal started later than expected so there wasn’t much time before the main stage. While they were examining their makeup and hair in the car due to the rain, the traitor, who had gone out to see the situation outside, returned.

“The rain has almost stopped, it’s to the point where only a few drops are falling.”

“Ah… That’s a relief.”

So the weather center wasn’t completely wrong. It really did pass.

When I looked outside, it was clearly raining sparsely. The ballad singer was on stage, performing without an umbrella. Since they said that they would transfer to the studio after his performance before it was our turn, there really wasn’t much time left.

Just when I was about to return to the tarp with the girls and wait.

The youngest writer peeped in.

“Umm…”

“Ah, Ms. Writer. It’s fortunate that the rain stopped.”

She showed an awkward expression at my words before saying,

“Umm, Mr. Manager. We got a call from the studio control booth…”

“Yes.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think Neptune can perform.”

“Pardon?”

“It seems they hastily came to this decision after seeing one of Neptune’s members fall. They said that it could be a big problem if any mishaps occur due to safety… I’m sorry. We will pay you more than the pay we discussed previously.”

I stood blankly, processing her words. Then I suddenly looked back. At the people looking in this direction. And amongst them, I saw Lee Songha first, standing rigidly with widened eyes.

Chapter 38: When An Unexpected Event Occurs (2)

"Think of it as getting rid of your bad luck."

Koreans say this in a sense that since something bad happened to you, you have prevented any further bad things from happening. This is mainly used as a way to comfort the person. English equivalent is 'It could have been worse.'

Im Seoyoung said abruptly on our way back.

"The floor was really slippery. Imagine if we performed on it again, and someone else fell and broke their bone. What would we do about Next K-Star then?"

"Yeah. I was about to fall too."

"It would have been worse if we got hurt, and if it affected our schedule."

Each of the girls said something.

I glanced at Lee Songha, who was sitting in the rear seat, through the rear-view mirror. It wasn't like Lee Songha was showing she felt guilty by crying or anything. However, everyone knew that she wasn't in a good condition right now.

When we stopped at a rest stop, we told the girls to pick out their lunches, and Lee Songha bought 3 people's worth of food. And she

was currently in the middle of eating it all.

They said she used to order night time delivery when she was stressed. She wasn't showing it, but there was no doubt she was stressed right now.

If she simply cried, the other girls could comfort her, but since she bottled it all inside and said she was fine, there was nothing they could do right now except go along with her.

It was the same for me.

"Songha."

At my call, Songha raised her head.

"Does it taste good?"

"Yes. Would you like one?"

"Is there still food left to give to me?"

She ate so ferociously and yet there was still some left?

When I looked through the rear-view mirror, Lee Songha was taking her time before holding something out. It was a chicken skewer coated with red sauce.

“… Do you want it?”

“No, you can eat it all.”

How could I take that from her?

Im Seoyoung stared at Lee Songha before saying,

“How can you eat so much and not gain weight?”

“It’s because she burns up as many calories as she eats, dummy. Since you don’t exercise, you gain as much as you eat.”

At LJ’s teasing words, Im Seoyoung widened her eyes.

“What, I exercise too!”

“What a joke. What exercise do you do besides breathing? What? Spoon lifts?”

“Hey, then what about you…!”

Im Seoyoung stuttered. She couldn’t say any more. LJ wasn’t a good opponent to ask, ‘How much do you exercise?’ since she boxed as a hobby. Im Seoyoung, wanting to say something, changed her target.

“What about Taehee unni!? Taehee unni always takes over the sofa and rolls around instead of exercising when we don’t practice, but she still doesn’t gain weight!”

“That’s unni’s nature, dummy. If you find it unfair, be born again.”

“Don’t call me a dummy, dummy!”

Because of the two, the mood didn’t have the opportunity to subside. When I glanced at Lee Songha, she had a faint smile as she watched their childish dispute.

Noisy shouts could be heard for a while until they gradually died down. Soon, a silence fell in the car. When I looked through the rear-view mirror, they were all sleeping.

“They fell asleep.”

“Since they were drenched in rain, let’s just let them sleep until we arrive.”

The traitor said, who was sitting in the passenger seat, looking at his phone.

Ah. Now that I thought about it, we still had something left to talk about.

“Choi Gunyoung.”

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to ask me something before?”

“Ah. That.”

As if he now remembered, the traitor showed a strange expression as he looked at me. I was curious what words would pop out of his mouth. Why did he bring up my senses, and what did he mean by he wanted to ask me something for a while?

Just then, the traitor grinned as he said,

“Nah, it’s nothing.”

It’s nothing?

“Hey, I can’t concentrate on driving because I’m curious. What is it?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Do you think it won’t bug me?

“It really isn’t anything.”

Since he himself said it wasn’t anything, it wasn’t like I could threaten him to open his mouth and spill whatever he was going to say. After complicating my thoughts, he coolly went back to his phone.

If I didn’t see what kind of person Choi Gunyoung was or what kinds of things he would do later on with my foresight ability, my heart would have been calm. It currently felt like I was walking around with a bomb I had no idea when would explode.

I didn’t know whether he would explode or if my nerves would break first.

When we arrived at Knet Studio, Kim Hyunjo was already waiting in the waiting room.

“Songha, I heard you fell. Are you okay?”

“Yup. I’m fine. I’m not hurt.”

Only after Kim Hyunjo confirmed she was alright was he relieved.

Unlike music broadcasts, the waiting time for Next K-Star wasn’t long. We used the 30 minutes of free time to give a strong impression to other teams and greet the judges we saw for the first time.

There was a total of three judges for Next K-Star. Producer Song Baekjin, who turned out many famous stars who could be recognized by name, Cha Suzy, who was a skilled vocalist of a former girl group, and a star songwriter Simon Lee, who often appeared on variety shows. I could easily tell what motives Knet had by casting these three.

All three of them were characters with a history of malicious remarks.

We didn't have the opportunity to talk with the judges for a long time. There were 8 participating teams, and each team had their members and staff, tens of people were gathered in front of the judges' waiting room so we were only barely able to greet them, let alone have a conversation.

A few team loitered around the judges, but we returned to our waiting room without any lingering feelings. We chose to have the girls practice their song once more before their performance instead of getting looked at one more time by the judges.

Soon after, an Floor Director came to each waiting room and informed everyone,

"We are recording in 5 minutes! Please standby!"

The makeup artists and stylists were left to watch through the monitors in the waiting room while the rest of us moved.

After getting out of the confusion that was the waiting room hallway and sitting in the spectator seat in the open hall, I could see the entire filming site. It was completely different from the simple filming set from before. My mouth opened at the overwhelming scale.

Rails were installed on the high ceiling, and all sorts of different lights hung down and repeatedly flashed on and off.

“Please don’t step there! If the camera goes out, it’ll be big trouble!”

“Reset the judges’ table so that the product placement display nicely!”

“Put mics on the cast. Did you put them on standby?”

“Everyone besides Cha Suzy! She said she was changing her outfit!”

“What?!”

“She said that her outfit concept was completely different from the other judges so she was going to change her outfit! She said it’s almost here through an express delivery service and that she will be out in 10 minutes!”

“Ah, damn it...!”

Below the stage, the staff were busy shouting and running around. Since everywhere I looked was interesting, I looked around at my surroundings before stopping my gaze on Neptune. The girls had been busy looking around last time, but this time, they were focused with earphones in their ears.

“You both turned off your phones, right?”

Kim Hyunjo turned to look at the traitor and me and asked.

“Of course.”

“It’s very troublesome if you move around down there and block or touch a camera so be careful. Don’t forget if a Video Journalist asks for an interview to carefully think about each of your answers 2 or 3 times before answering.”

“Yes.”

“Since there will be more instances where I leave it to you guys from now on, watch carefully.”

My ears pricked. Although I clearly knew that I had a lot left to learn, it was definitely exciting to be responsible for everything myself. Even though I would feel a larger sense of responsibility, the sense of achievement at the end of the day would be greater.

We were nodding our heads when someone said from behind,

“Watching the girls, teaching new recruits, you have it hard.”

When I turned around, it was Sugar Cats members and their chief. We passed each other a few times in our last filming, and maybe it was because Sugar Cats looked dishonest every time I saw them, but their manager didn’t give a good impression either.

The Sugar Cats chief glanced at Neptune and laughed,

“But Neptune’s working hard. Isn’t today a battle to see who gets the least criticism anyways? The production crew said they were going to go strong in the beginning, and all three judges are the types to say things without a filter.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about the judges coming on strong since the show needs a reaction from the start. Still, those who everyone thinks did well would be pumped up by the judges, so it all depends on how they do.”

The Sugar Cats chief grinned at Kim Hyunjo’s aloof reply.

“Do you think a lot of them will be like that? Those judge’s standards are so high. Well, I don’t care whether they come on strong or not, I just hope the ratings are good.”

It wasn't only the two of them. There were many people around us who were worried about the ratings. Well, in variety programs like this, there was nothing more important than the ratings. The only person who was involved in Next K-Star and wasn't worried about the ratings was me.

As for me, I already knew that Next K-Star would get a high rating and would get additional seasons. I wished that the first broadcast was released quickly so I could personally experience Neptune's rise in popularity. Only then would the girls not experience the illogical events like this morning, and I could increase our area of activity.

"Seoyoung. Did you practice a lot?"

The Sugar Cats leader, Han Saetbyol, suddenly leaned out. Im Seoyoung frowned slightly as she took off her earphones.

"Yeah. I did as much as I could."

"Really? You had a lot of time. So lucky. We had so many other schedules that we didn't make a lot of time to practice."

If someone else had said it, I would have thoughtlessly glossed over it, but after bumping into each other a few times, I always heard her words through a translator. 'We didn't have enough time to practice because we had other schedules, but since no one calls for you, you had a lot of time to practice.'

If someone said I was a narrow-minded person, I had nothing to say, but I really wish they came down after being criticized by the judges to the point where not even ashes were left.

Just then, LJ, who was next to Im Seoyoung, mumbled,

“Then you should have practiced instead of staying in front of the judges’ waiting room.”

“… What?”

When Han Saetbyol’s expression distorted, LJ shrugged her shoulders. That moment, both sides became busy, checking to see if there were any VJs nearby.

Even as I felt reassured after confirming the VJs were far away, I inwardly felt refreshed at LJ’s straightforward words. To be honest, it felt like a 10-year indigestion was cleared.

“Hey!”

Im Seoyoung pinched LJ’s side.

“What?! Did I say anything wrong?”

“What are you going to do if there was a camera?!”

Fights between children would become fights between parents. Once it seemed the girls were getting in a fight of nerves, the mood between the chiefs became chilly. Kim Hyunjo and the Sugar Cats manager didn't continue their conversation.

"Each team member put on your mics and sit at the very front seats! We will be recording soon!"

The production crew member's voice resounded loudly.

The girls took their earphones off and got up. Kim Hyunjo patted each of their shoulders and said,

"You heard, right? Even if the judges criticize you harshly, just think that they are being harsh because it's a show and don't take it to heart."

"Don't worry, oppa. After getting wet in the rain this morning, my mentality has become incredibly strong."

Im Seoyoung clenched a fist.

"I will come back after showing everything I couldn't show this morning!"

Chapter 39: When An Unexpected Event Occurs (3)

They looked like they were about to go to battle. I gave each of them words or encouragement to boost their morale.

Lee Taehee who was always dependable at times like this, Im Seoyoung who looked a bit nervous, luckily, her condition was good, and LJ who was so focused that I felt bad saying something.

Lastly, to Lee Songha, who was silently burning up.

“Songha, just do like you did in practice.”

“Yes. I will do my best and return.”

Lee Songha nodded her head and followed behind the other girls who going to the front.

Just then, the first mission recording of Next K-Star had begun.

I realized something considerably while watching the recording scene.

It wasn’t that the recording process, in which they stopped and resumed with multiple times, was very tiring or that VJs who went around putting cameras in people’s faces and filming managers and staff members’ reactions were very bothersome either.

The biggest thing I realized was that you couldn't thoughtlessly tell people to sing without instrumentals.

Of course, there were teams or members who did well enough that the spectators shouted in admiration. The ones who the judges clapped for and praised that they could become the next generation K-Star.

However, the performances of some teams literally made you shout. Even though they were new, it came to a point where you would worry whether it was okay to show a performance like that on a show with the words 'Next K-Star' in its title.

The ones who were unrivaled amongst them was precisely the team currently on the stage.

Sugar Cats.

"…. Hmmm."

Eventually, a sound I couldn't keep contained escaped. It wasn't only me, the people next to me were unable to look at the stage directly and avoided their gazes. There wasn't even a need to look far, Kim Hyunjo even covered his face with the hand that had been supporting his chin.

He couldn't help it. Even if they had insufficient time to practice, this was too severe.

After the shocking 3 minutes and 30 seconds had passed, the Sugar Cats members stood in front of the judges' table. Although their hearts were probably thumping right now, I was calming my heart as well as we waited for the judges' evaluation.

This moment right now was filled with more anticipation than the first episode of a drama and more excitement than its last episode.

The malicious character who stood out even amongst the three judges, Cha Suzy who had smashed the mentalities of those who performed ahead with her harsh criticisms was first to grab her mic. I didn't think too well of her since she was the type to give overly strong remarks...

"You should have called your team Bitter Cats instead of Sugar Cats. Bitter, bitter. It's my first time scowling while listening to a song."

I think I might become her fan.

The Sugar Cats girls were taken aback as they stammered and tried to pass each other the mic. However, there were still two more judges left. Before the Sugar Cats could say a word, the criticisms poured in.

"Because you're singing without instrumentals, your skills are clearly revealed. This means that you were more or less covering your insufficiencies with the instrumentals up until now."

“Your key was wavering from the beginning to the end, and you lost the beat so many times I gave up counting.”

“There’s nothing to compliment about. And you were a team that had good preliminary responses from our viewers…”

“That’s because they went on a lot of variety shows.”

My blood seemed to flow with bubbling soda.

Ah. It felt like my heart had finally found peace at last.

The Sugar Cats got off the stage while crying. When two VJs filmed their crying figures on their way back to the seats, they wailed, saying that they made so many mistakes because they were nervous as this was their first mission.

After their interview, the Sugar Cats returned to their seats behind us.

The Sugar Cats chief clicked his tongue.

“The judges said those words to make the first episode stimulating.”

“Still, that was too much. Honestly, if we had more time to practice…”

“They said we were Bitter Cats, oppa. Were we that bad?”

“No. You know Cha Suzy’s style. Because people tell her she’s a tough unni and a girl crush, she said those harsh comments to harden her character. You didn’t do so bad to hear those words. Look at the other teams, the evaluations will be similar.”

At his final words, Kim Hyunjo flipped his head around. The Sugar Cats chief cleared his throat and avoided his gaze.

It was because Neptune was up next.

The girls, who were waiting with other teams in the front row, cheered and got up. Then they calmly walked in front of the judges’ table.

“Neptune… They have the lowest popularity amongst the participating teams.”

“Their skills were pretty good when I saw their music video.”

“If we judged that, then no team would have been criticized.”

The judges, who had seen Neptune’s preliminary video ahead of time, exchanged some light chatter. Lee Taehee and Im Seoyoung smoothly answered their questions.

“Good. Then, let’s see your performance.”

“Yes!”

I clenched the armrests and watched the stage.

Breaking the silence, their no-instrumentals performance began with Lee Taehee’s lead.

A bittersweet voice that contained a deep reverberation roused the open hall. A monitor, placed to one side of the stage, caught the judges fixing their postures. It wasn’t only the judges but the spectators in the seats, and even the staff stopped talking and turned to look at the stage.

Im Seoyoung’s lively tone added life to the song, and LJ’s rap was so powerful and strong that my shoulders went up and down without me noticing.

However, the most surprising part was Lee Songha.

During this time, I had seen Lee Songha practicing a few times, but she was currently better than any of those times. It was to the point where I thought that effort didn’t betray you. Those who weren’t familiar with her may think that this much skill wasn’t worth getting in a fuss, but I knew that this performance was the result of endless effort.

It wasn’t only Lee Songha, all four of them poured all the time,

sweat and effort they had spent practicing since the moment the mission was announced into these 3 minutes and 40 seconds. They didn't make any mistakes, and their performance made you forget that there weren't any instrumentals.

"Good. This is good."

Kim Hyunjo, who was in front of me, mumbled in an excited voice. I nodded my head as well.

"Looks like she really did get rid of her bad luck this morning. I didn't think she'd do this well."

Once their performance ended, the girls waited for the judges' evaluation as they calmed their breaths. The girls were obviously nervous, but even I, who was watching from afar, was quite nervous as well.

Cha Suzy raised her mic.

"It was really good. I'm curious why you weren't popular until now. Why didn't you become popular?"

The expressions of the girls, who were waiting on top of the stage for their evaluation, brightened at the compliment that exceeded their expectations. Even our side was in a festive mood. Kim Hyunjo hit the traitor's and my shoulders with his excited palms, and I was too excited that it didn't hurt. I currently didn't care about the Sugar Cats grumbling behind me in the slightest.

“Taehee is really too good. No, I’m not saying that you’re too good to be an idol, but it’s just I want to listen to you sing the song for the full 3 minutes and 40 seconds by yourself.

“Seoyoung balances out the team well. Your tone and even your image. Above all, even though you aren’t very tall, you catch people’s attention as if the camera is zoomed in on you. It’s because you absorb 120% of your choreography. Looking at your record, I want to quickly confirm the entertainment sense you’ve shown in variety programs.”

“Even if the underground community hasn’t heard of Neptune, they know LJ. So I was inwardly eager to see you, but after I seeing your performance, it was beyond my expectations.”

Simon Lee and Producer Song Baekjin exchange some generous compliments. After every comment, the girls would express their thanks in proud expressions. It was to the point where the mood on the stage couldn’t get any better. Light expectations brushed over Lee Songha’s flushed cheeks. I gulped down my saliva and perked my ears up as well.

Cha Suzy raised her mic.

“Lee Songha.”

“Yes.”

“You alone lowered the team’s average. Are you practicing properly?”

I almost stood up.

I thought there was nothing I could do about criticisms about skill. I still didn’t know much about music, and these people had at least ten of years of music experience, so, of course, their words were right.

However, asking whether she practiced properly or not was being too cruel to Lee Songha.

She was someone who always stayed behind to practice some more after the girls had finished practicing and returned to their residence. To make matters worse, Simon Lee and Song Baekjin also added in,

“That is a bit regretful.”

“Her visuals are too good. Since she’s so eye-catching, my vision keeps going to her, but when I look at her, there isn’t anything more. It would make more sense if you had a record in acting or entertainment, but that’s not the case either.”

“Since she has the basics if she increases her practice time from now on…”

Lee Songha’s head drooped. A camera caught her expression as it

was displayed on a stage monitor. The camera director may have expected to see tears, but she was silently enduring their cold-hearted evaluations.

"Haa..."

Kim Hyunjo rubbed his face. Unable to calm my complicated heart, I simply sighed. All of a sudden, I realized that the voices behind me suddenly became brighter. Because we didn't want to show Lee Songha their deceitful figures, we got up from our seats.

The girls came down from the stage. Although they ended up with a much higher score than the average team, they weren't cheerful. A VJ stubbornly asked Lee Songha questions, but when she showed no signs of crying, he left soon after.

When Lee Songha came close, Kim Hyunjo patted her slender shoulders.

"Songha, I said it before, right? The words the judges are saying..."

"I know. It's fine, oppa."

"Okay. Since this is the beginning, you just need to show that you're improving."

"Yup."

Lee Songha smiled faintly as she nodded her head.

Seeing her face, I suddenly thought.

How many times had Lee Songha said she was fine today?

The recording ended well after midnight.

“There is a week left until the next recording, so don’t practice today and go home and rest.”

Kim Hyunjo requested. The girls nodded heavily and got in the van. I was thinking about whether to sit in the passenger seat or at the back when Lee Songha slowly approached me from behind and grabbed my clothes.

“What’s wrong?”

“One second.”

When I took a few steps towards in the direction she was pulling, she looked around and mumbled in a small voice,

“Oppa.”

“Yeah.”

“My foot hurts a little.”

“What?”

I quickly looked down.

“It hurts? Since when?”

“Since I fell.”

If it was after she fell… Don’t tell me it was back during their rehearsal in the rain? That was so long ago. Didn’t that mean she didn’t say that she was hurt since then?

“You’re telling….!”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t tell the unnies.”

Lee Songha tightly held on my clothes with both her hands and prevented me from moving. Dumbfounded, I looked at her, but she shook her head.

That moment, I recalled the conversation we had on our way back from the morning schedule. They talked about thinking of it as getting rid of her bad luck and that it would have been more troublesome if she got hurt and it affected their Next K-Star schedule.

If the girls somehow found out that Lee Songha was hiding the fact she was hurt, they might blame themselves. That was probably why Lee Songha was so desperately asking me now.

"I get it. I get it, but I need to tell the chief. We need to go to the hospital. I'll come back after telling the chief so let go. My clothes will rip."

Only then did her white-knuckled fingers loosen up.

Chapter 40: Is It A Miscasting? Or A Divine Move? (1)

Almost running, I rushed and grabbed Kim Hyunjo, who was about to get in the passenger seat. When I told him the situation in a small voice so no one else could hear, his expression became serious.

“She told me we must not tell the girls.”

“Really, that girl... Then, Sunwoo, you go take her to an emergency room.”

“I will. Don’t worry.”

“Call me when you get home.”

“Yes.”

Kim Hyunjo skillfully made up a story. That she had to rush to the company due to a problem with her drama audition. Only the traitor gave a slightly doubtful look, the girls got in the van and left without much suspicion.

Lee Songha and I grabbed a taxi and went the closest emergency room. I was worried that it might be serious, but luckily, it was a minor sprain.

When we left the hospital after getting treated, it was just past 1 a.m.

I went out towards the street to look for a taxi, but Lee Songha staggered behind me like a puppy in the rain. Any person looking at her would find their hearts go soft.

“You want some juice before we go?”

“Yes.”

Lee Songha’s footsteps halted.

I left her on a bench and bought a juice she liked from a nearby vending machine. I handed her the juice and sat beside her.

I looked up at the sky with complicated thoughts. It had been filled with dark clouds this morning, but as if they had been washed away, the moon in the sky was especially bright.

After thinking for a moment, I asked,

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

A slight shadow cast over her face.

“Sorry.”

“What were you going to do if it was serious? Did you not tell us you were hurt in case we wouldn’t let you perform?”

It seemed that trying not to sound too pressuring paid off as Lee Songha, who had been fiddling with the juice bottle, opened her heavy lips.

“I messed everything up.”

“Why is it your fault? It’s the rain’s.”

It was also the staff’s fault for not setting up tarps because they would look messy.

That was why they made the girls dance in the rain, making one of them fall, only to cancel their performance in the end?

I found out the names of the program’s PD and the department head. I even resolved myself to reject them outright just in case they tried to cast the girls once they became famous.

When I recalled the staff again, irritation suddenly surged in me. While I tried to calm down by taking deep breaths, I saw Lee Songha’s legs pull back. Now that I thought about it, even though she was dressed warmly above, her bare legs stretched out from below her skirt.

I clicked my tongue as I took off my coat and handed it to her. Well, this wasn't in a good condition either because it had dried after getting completely soaked, but at least it would protect her from the wind.

"Cover your legs with this."

"It's fi..."

"Don't say you're fine. Was what happened before fine?"

I spat before regretting it. I felt that I needlessly made her, who had just calmed down, recall bad thoughts again. When I glanced at her, her expression was gloomier than before.

Damn, what should I do?

Just as my head was spinning more furiously than any other time, Lee Songha fiddled with my coat covering her knees and mumbled in a quiet voice,

"I'm a useless person."

"... What?"

"..."

“What did you say?”

I thought I heard it wrong, but looking at how she was looking down wordlessly, it seemed I had heard correctly.

Just what nonsense was she saying now?

When I was about to open my mouth, Lee Songha blinked her eyes. Then, without any warning, a tear dripped down from her eye.

My heart dropped.

I had seen kids cry and had comforted them countless times. However, they were the type to cry as if they were about to die one moment, then come back to life the moment they saw their mom.

“Umm… Songha.”

“Yes.”

Lee Songha rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. It ended with one teardrop. However, even if no more tears fell, her face was gloomy as if tears could fall at any moment.

I didn’t recall ever seen her so depressed.

What should I do if I tried to say things to comfort her and it only made things worse? It looked it was my fault this time as well.

It seemed she didn't want to let the other girls know, so how should I comfort her...

"You, uh... Do you want to call your parents? To feel better. Should I leave?"

I said before regretting it. It was too late at night to call her parents right now.

Lee Songha's face instantly darkened.

"My mom and dad don't like that I'm a celebrity. They ask why I keep doing this when it's not working out."

"Uhh...."

"They haven't called much after our last album flunked."

I felt like I was going crazy.

I opened and closed my mouth a few times before saying exactly what was on my mind.

"Why are you useless? You did well during the recording. The

chief, Gunyoung and I, we were all going crazy about how great you were. Also, even if you might not be as good at dancing or singing, isn't your talent concentrated in acting?"

Lee Songha stared at me.

"Look, even now. You were so great at acting that no one knew your ankle hurt until you told me. Choi Gunyoung, he's quick-witted, but he still didn't know."

When I said this while mixing in a few jokes, Lee Songha's eyes shined slightly.

"Once an episode of your drama airs, you will definitely hear them say things like, 'The rediscovery of Lee Songha'."

Ah. The overcast on her face slowly faded away. A smile peeped out from within.

"I really wish I am as talented in acting like oppa says."

Luckily, she looked better as she instantly gulped down her juice before saying,

"I want to audition quickly. I am going to try really hard."

"Yeah, you just do as you're doing now."

Then, I will try to create an opportunity however I can.

Looking at the side of her face, I suddenly thought.

I thought of how I wanted to see Lee Songha's talent fully bloom. I thought of how I wanted to see her figure, more confident and beautiful than anyone else, standing tall in an unimaginably grand and magnificent place.

With my strength.

I wanted... to take her there with my own hands.

I sent Lee Songha to her residence and returned to my one-room apartment.

I dragged my heavy legs to the door when I saw a delivery box in front of my door. When I wondered what it was, I remembered how my mom said she sent me a package.

When I brought it inside and opened it, I saw pakimchi and other dry side dishes uniformly packed in resealable bags as well as a glass bottle with honey-soaked ginger.

It was too late right now, so I decided to call her before work tomorrow.

I boiled some water and brewed myself a cup of ginger tea. When

I sat down at my desk chair and took a sip, my stiff body slowly relaxed.

I felt refreshed.

Now that my stomach was warm, I felt sleepy. Without even taking off my coat, I slouched over my desk. My body felt heavy and sluggish.

Should I just sleep like this?

While I was thinking about it, my phone vibrated. When I took it out, it was Kim Hyunjo.

Ah, he told me to call him.

“Yes, chief. I just got home.”

-Okay. How’s Songha?

“They said it was a minor sprain and that we shouldn’t worry about it too much.”

-That’s good. Then, there’s no problem with auditioning, right?

My mind jolted.

“Auditioning?”

-I talked with Younghoon hyung, and he said that the CEO of Pan Production had brought over the script this afternoon. Hyung personally met with him and read the script, and he said it was good. Although there needs to be further discussion, it looks like Songha can prepare to audition for this project.

Finally!

Unable to contain my excitement, I jumped up.

I brought the opportunity right in front of my eyes. All that was left was to grab it.

Lee Songha’s face brushed past my mind. How happy would she be if I told her?

-Oh, right. I’m thinking about leaving Lee Songha’s personal schedule up to you from now on. What do you think?

“…!”

-It’s a project you brought in, and it seems like Lee Songha listens to you as well. And looking at how you’ve been, it seems alright to trust you with this. Well, if you don’t want to, then you don’t have to.

“Nope! I will!”

I replied in a voice akin to a scream. I heard laughter from the other side. It seemed my voice was quite loud as my next door neighbor knocked on the wall so I silently clenched my fists and shook them. It was still hard to contain my excitement with just this so I paced back and forth in my small room.

Just a moment ago, my mind felt tired, and I was only filled with the thoughts of resting, but it felt like I could easily go out to work right now.

Just then, Kim Hyunjo suddenly added in,

-Ah, also, this isn’t anything certain. But they say that the leading male actor for this project might be from our company.

...What?

-I don’t know the specifics so let’s talk at work.

He hung up. However, I was unable to move from my spot.

It felt like cold water had been poured on me.

In the future I saw. In the future where I heard the news about how Cat Guardian Ghost was a big hit, the male lead wasn’t an actor from W&U.

Maybe… the drama’s lead actor might change?

I spent the rest of the night wide awake before going to work.

Endless thoughts trailed after one another, not letting me sleep.

Why did a W&U actor come up when discussing the role of the Cat Guardian Ghost lead?

If it really changed, who would be the new lead?

Don’t, don’t tell me it’s Sung Dowon? No. That’s going too far. It will definitely not be the case. I am not that unlucky.

Haa… If something somehow changed, it would inevitably change the future as well.

The role of the interpreter, which Songha would audition for, was a supporting role, but the male lead would be the poster board of the drama.

If the male lead was changed in a drama, which was expected to be a hit, would the drama still be a hit as expected?

Damn. I thought that as long as Lee Songha was cast in the Cat

Guardian Ghost, even if it wasn't an 8-lane highway, I believed that her path would at least be paved with cement. Well, nothing was easy.

Kim Hyunjo was surprised when I entered the office.

"Why did you come to work so early? Your dark circles have reached your chin."

"I was curious about what happened to Cat Guardian Ghost."

"Aha, so that's why you came in so early? Now that your shoulders feel heavy, you can't sleep?"

I simply laughed awkwardly. As if he understood my urgent mind, he folded his arms and said,

"I told Pan Production your contact information so they'll contact you. Set an audition date. If any other issues that need to be decided come up, bring them to me first."

"Yes. But you said how the male lead might be from our company..."

"Ah, that?"

Please tell me negotiations broke down. Please.

In the worst case scenario, even if the male lead changed, it couldn't be as bad as Sung Dowon. I couldn't let Sung Dowon ruin my plans.

While I was uneasy, Kim Hyunjo asked,

"Do you know Seo Jijoon?"

"... Seo Jijoon?"

Of course, I knew him. He was an actor W&U personally trained and debuted.

He had a smart, refined image, and because he trained for a long time, he was a good actor who had never created controversy with his acting skills.

He had been successful in public networks' weekend dramas and weekday miniseries one after another and fixed himself a spot as a top star. I heard rumors he was carefully looking through scenarios to take to the big screen.

"It seems the Pan Production CEO coincidentally met Seo Jijoon when he came here. So he gave him the script, and when Seo Jijoon read it, he said he wanted to do it?"

Chapter 41: Is It A Miscasting? Or A Divine Move? (2)

Seo Jijoon. Seo Jijoon might become the lead...

“But, the team 2 leader is opposing it so we don’t know how it will turn out.”

Since he was someone I didn’t expect, my mind became more complicated.

“Oh, right. The script. You need to take a look at it too.”

“Ah.”

Kim Hyunjo took out a thick envelope from a desk drawer. I gulped down my saliva as I received it. When I opened it, I saw two scripts printed on A4 papers. They were the first and second episodes of Cat Guardian Ghost.

After many ups and downs, I finally held the script which had become a big hit in my hands.

I carried the script and shut myself in a meeting room.

After reading the two 50-page scripts, I let out the sigh I had been

holding in.

It was fun.

Not one scene was boring. The lead and support, even the extras, all the characters seemed lifelike. It followed the fantasy romantic comedy genre while mixing in a complex, yet strong composition of characters as well as realistic dialogue.

I had only read the text, yet it felt like the two episodes were playing in front of my eyes.

The script deserved its praise as doing all the work as it truly was entertaining.

… Then let’s think about the situation again.

If I thought with the presumption that the lead would change, Seo Jijoon was definitely not a bad card.

From what I knew, strong candidates for the male lead were actors, Im Joowon and Park Hyemin. When looking at their levels, Seo Jijoon was the best.

The problem was that using a successful actor didn’t directly lead to success. Then, wouldn’t every drama that cast top actors become a hit?

The time when the ‘top actor effect’ worked had passed, now the key was how well they could digest their role.

How well they brought out the character’s charm.

They had to have decent acting skills, however, when an actor who could perfectly get into his character and a great script met, it would have an explosive synergistic effect.

The male lead in Cat Guardian Ghost had the outer appearance of an extreme perfectionist, but he was careful and shy on the inside. Although, in some ways, he may look foolish, that was actually his charm.

But the Seo Jijoon I knew was an actor who had shown a very consistent image up until now.

A cold, irritable elitist image.

Would an actor like that be able to properly digest this character?

Such a comical role?

… Damn, what a headache.

I thought about it by myself for a while before going up to the PR

office on the fifth floor. Of course, I carried coffee in both hands.

“Team leader, have some coffee.”

“Huh?”

Familiar faces poked out between the partitions. Team Leader Park grinned as she got up.

“I’m starting to used to you standing there like that.”

“I know, right? Although we’re happy since you bring coffee every time you come here.”

“What’s it today?”

I asked after drinking a sip of my coffee,

“Dramas like… Hwarang of Silla, The Beast, The Odd Man, Couple’s Obligation.”

“Yeah, they were all successful dramas.”

“If their leading actors had been changed, would they still have been successful?”

Team Leader Park knit her brows as she thought before opening

her mouth,

“Well, although there would be no end to it if we kept going on and on… in one word, it’s luck.”

“Luck…”

“They could have failed or become even greater successes. Or else, why would they say casting is a gamble?”

“But if we’re talking the projects Sunwoo said, even if the leading actors changed, wouldn’t they still have been decent?”

The female employee added in while rubbing her chin in a serious manner.

“I mean, those projects had good scripts as their base. The directing was good too.”

“That’s true. No matter what we say, the script undoubtedly plays a large role. Unless the changed actor wasn’t terrible at acting or their chemistry with other actors didn’t work out,”

Added in the male employee.

Those were my thoughts as well. Just as I was about to open my mouth, Team Leader Park abruptly said,

“Cat Guardian Ghost. It seems you have a ton of worries about that project. We read the script yesterday, and it was fun. It was the most entertaining out of the projects I’ve read recently.”

“That’s right. The synopsis wasn’t very good, but I read the script without noticing time pass.”

“You brought Next K-Star on your first day, and if this drama’s a hit as well, there really is something up with you, Sunwoo. We’ll need to keep watch.”

Team Leader Park gave a meaningful smile as she prodded,

“But, about why you asked if a drama will be okay even if the leading actor had been changed. Is it maybe because Jijoon might go in as the male lead? Because you worry the project will become weird if he joins?”

“Is that true? Then who did you think will be the male lead? Kim Yeonsung? Im Joowon?”

“Ey, Jijoon is better than them. If they get can get Jijoon, the production side will be completely ecstatic.”

I briefly licked my lips before saying,

“I know that Seo Jijoon is a great actor. However, the male lead has parts throughout where he acts foolishly. And in reality, Seo Jijoon’s image is…”

“Ah, you haven’t seen Jijoon in person yet, have you?”

Team Leader Park suddenly laughed out loud. Even the two employees shook their heads.

“It’s not like Jijoon has no reason for wanting to do this drama.”

“Pardon?”

“If I were to say this in the perspective of someone who knows the person known as Seo Jijoon well, if he gets cast, I bet this will be a divine move for the project?”

… A divine move?

Management Business Department Team 2.

A heavy air hung in the office where two people were sitting face to face with each other

“Jijoon, you weren’t like this before. Why are you suddenly so stubborn?”

The team 2 leader vigorously scratched his shaggy hair

“We already decided to film a movie this year. We only need to pick a scenario. Once you film a movie with cinematic quality, the

title ‘Movie Star’ will be stuck next to your name, and you will be worth much…”

“Team leader.”

Seo Jijoon said in a calm voice filled with certainty,

“The scenario team leader gave me. The roles you suggested me saying that they fit me. In reality, I don’t really understand. You know I’m dumb. How can I act when I don’t understand the character?”

“Jijoon, listen to me. That’s…!”

“But Cat Guardian Ghost. I think I can do well in that project. It’s fun as well.”

“No, even if you’re going to do a miniseries, why does it have to be on cable of all places? Huh? So many projects from public TV networks wanted you. You should know as well, no matter how well-made a drama is on cable, there are many that end with a viewership rating of 1 percent. Why are you trying to waste your time? Don’t you know how important this time is for you?”

The team 2 leader, feeling frustrated, thumped his chest as he attempted to persuade him. Seo Jijoon, who had kept his silence until now, suddenly frowned with his sharp eyes before saying,

“I did all the projects team leader picked out for me until now. I

want to do what I want this time.”

“Jijoon!”

“I’m sorry.”

Jijoon deeply lowered his head.

After a moment had passed, Seo Jijoon opened the office door and left expressionlessly. His long legs walked in long strides before he let out a small sigh and opened the emergency exit door. Lee Bongjoon, his manager, who had been sitting on the stairs, stood up.

“How did it go? Did you tell it to him straight?”

After closing the door, Seo Jijoon slumped down.

“Uhh, I think so. Ah, damn. I thought I was going to die of suffocation!”

“Still, it’s lucky you weren’t eaten by the team leader.”

“That’s why I asked you to come with me! How can hyung let your actor go into a snake’s den alone?”

“Since you’re the actor, you can go in and say it

straightforwardly. If I went in there, I'd be fired. Would you like it if I was fired?"

"No, that's not it..."

Mumbled Seo Jijoon as he licked his lips. Lee Bongjoon let out a sigh and said with a relieved expression,

"Anyways, it's good that it went well. Even if you're a bit stubborn, I think it's good if you do this drama."

"Right? You think the same, right?"

"Of course. I knew it the moment I saw it. This is a script meant for you. As well as a role meant for you. I even thought that the writer wrote it with you in mind, you know?"

"Ah, really... How is it that hyung and I think so similarly?"

"Hehe. That's why I'm your manager."

The two crouched down on the cold emergency stairs and laughed for a while. Then, as if he suddenly thought of something, Lee Bongjoon mumbled,

"If this is the case, I should meet with Team 3's Lucky Charm. Since we might be filming together."

“Lucky what? Who’s that?”

“Do you know Neptune from our company?”

“Uh… I think I’ve heard of them before.”

“He’s their manager. They say he’s the one who brought this project here. He asked the PR team for the synopsis and even requested for the script to put one of Neptune’s members in the drama.”

“Ah, really? Then, if it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have seen this script?”

“I guess?”

“Hmm…”

Seo Jijoon, who thought with narrowed eyes, opened his mouth.

“Hyung, I want to come with you when you go meet that person.”

Pan Production. CEO Kim Pansuk didn’t move as he stared holes into his cellphone. Production Producer Park Sookyung placed the bowl of jjajangmyeon she had completely wiped clean down and said,

“CEO, your jjajangmyeon is going to get mushy. You should hurry up and eat it.”

“Do you think I can swallow jjajangmyeon right now? In this critical moment when Seo Jijoon is thinking about whether he will do our drama or not?”

“It’s not like the call will come faster because you’re staring like that?”

Director Shin Taekyun yawned as he joined in,

“The people from above are in a frenzy, telling us to quickly bring them Seo Jijoon’s contract. They say they are waiting with articles confirming his casting already written.”

“Haa… This is so nerve-wracking. So nerve-wracking.”

“I understand that that guy is good at acting, but will he fit with our project? Senior said you met him briefly yesterday.”

“I told you, I felt it that moment. If Director Shin and Writer Hong saw him, you’ll know what I mean. So we need to get him…”

CEO Kim Pansuk held his cellphone as if it was a treasure and slouched over the table.

Park Sookyung, who had been organizing the dishes, said,

“But, CEO. Was it Lee Songha? When should we schedule her audition? We promised to contact them so we need to decide fast.”

“Ah… that girl group? The one who’s acting for the first time?”

“Yes. For the role of the interpreter, Jung Haewon.”

Director Shin Taekyun, and even Writer Hong Jumi, who had her face in the bowl of jjamppong, lifted their heads. CEO Kim Pansuk said in an awkward expression,

“Don’t tell me, if she fails the audition, Seo Jijoon won’t join or anything, right?”

“No. It’s not like we sent it with Seo Jijoon in mind in the first place. They contacted us because the member known as Lee Songha read the synopsis and wanted to audition for it. They say her manager actively suggested it or something? I don’t even know where he heard about our drama, but they say he was the first one to ask for the synopsis as well.”

“Then. Contact this grateful manager and ask him if she could audition for an easier role instead of Jung Haewon. Since the role of Jung Haewon will be difficult.”

“Pardon?”

“Although Jung Haewon is a supporting role, she is of great importance. And if they don’t have the acting skills, they will definitely not be able to get into character.”

Writer Hong Jumi, as well as Director Shin Taekyun, nodded their heads.

CEO Kim Pansuk said it again,

“If we cast a first-timer and if they can’t act, the actor and the project gets criticized. How can we ruin this great script with a miscast?”

“Okay. I will call the manager.”

Park Sookyung picked up her cell phone and got up.

Spicy Korean-Chinese seafood soup (champong or jjampong) is one of the most popular dishes at Chinese restaurants in Korea and in Koreatowns all over the world. While these restaurants don't have lo mein or kung pao chicken, they serve jajangmyun (black bean noodles) or jjampong.

Chapter 42: Is It A Miscasting? Or A Divine Move? (3)

{So it turns out the production producer of Pan Production is a guy… The author never indicated this until now.}

I put aside my worries momentarily and headed towards the Neptune's residence.

I wanted to give Lee Songha the script as soon as possible. She needed to prepare for her audition, and I was too curious about what kind of acting would pop out if I gave this script to her since she had already made me anticipate her acting just from the short dialogue in the synopsis.

When I rang the doorbell after arriving, LJ opened the door with half-opened eyes. It seemed it hadn't been long since she had woken up as her long, shining blond hair was tangled and sleepiness seemed to drip from her eyebrows which were of the same color.

"You came?"

"Yeah. To give Songha the script."

"She's showering right now."

LJ stretched her arms and said in a passing tone,

“The passcode is 828289.”

“What?”

When I stopped in my tracks and looked at her, she scratched her neck.

“Next time, just come in by entering the passcode. We were thinking about telling you after a few months, but oppa doesn’t seem like a weird person. A robber, stalker or pervert. You aren’t any of them, right?”

“Umm. Probably not.”

“What is ‘probably’! I should just change the passcode!”

When I looked to where the sound was coming from, Im Seoyoung was lying on top of a giant rubber gym ball, belly side down. It was uncertain whether she was exercising or just lying on it.

Beside her, Lee Taehee was lying on the sofa and pressing the remote.

I exchanged greetings with them before sitting on the sofa as well. Not long ago, this place was unfamiliar to me like a new world, but now that I came here as often as mice to a food jug, it

felt like the sofa was my designated seat.

People used to store food (usually grains or plants) in jugs, and mice would frequent these jugs often to eat the food inside.

“Oppa, oppa, oppa.”

“Yeah. I heard you the first time.”

“Eh, there’s no sincerity in it if I say it once.”

Im Seoyoung fumbled as she pushed the gym ball forward and asked,

“What happened yesterday with Songha? There was something, wasn’t there?”

There was. A lot. There weren’t just one or two things that came to mind.

I concealed my prickling mind and shrugged my shoulders.

“Nothing much. Why?”

Im Seoyoung narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“I think there was. She came home all smiling yesterday. As if something good had happened.”

“Really? That’s odd.”

“That’s what I’m saying. And she had a bandage wrapped around her foot.”

Ah. We were caught.

I stealthily avoided Im Seoyoung’s sharp eyes. Lee Taehee turned off the TV and looked at me.

“She said it wasn’t much. Is she really fine?”

“They said it’s a slight sprain. As long as she looks after it properly, there should be no problems.”

It seemed they had been worried as their expressions relaxed a little.

Not long after, the sound of water coming from the bathroom stopped. The door suddenly opened, and Lee Songha walked out while drying her wet hair with a towel. Just like the day I first met her.

Then and now, the scene was great.

“Uh, oppa.”

Lee Songha came closer with a happy expression.

“Did you sleep well? Aren’t you tired?”

“This much is fi... My stamina is good. I even ate before I slept yesterday.”

Seeing her change her words in the middle, it seemed she remembered me saying not to say she was fine yesterday so I laughed.

I took out two envelopes from my bag. One for Lee Songha, and the other I copied for myself.

“This is the script for Cat Guardian Ghost.”

“Ah...!”

“Since you need to practice for the audition, let’s read it together.”

Lee Songha quickly grabbed the envelope and checked its contents. Then, she looked at the other girls before grabbing my arm.

“Let’s go inside.”

“What?”

I was suddenly pulled into her room. From behind, Im Seoyoung snapped saying that she wouldn’t listen since she was being so cheap, but Lee Songha firmly shut her door.

I awkwardly looked around in the room I entered for the first time.

Hmmm.... Although I didn’t have any particular delusions of a girl’s room, I didn’t imagine it would be like this. It was very similar to my nieces and nephews’ room. Instead of cute items, there were empty chip bags and crumbs on the floor.

When I looked at this disaster, Lee Songha acted as if she was cleaning it up before simply shaking the brown rug under her bed. Then, as if in a hurry, she took out the script, almost turning the envelope inside out.

“Please sit here. I’m going to read the script first.”

“Uh, okay.”

For a while, Lee Songha focused on the script, seemingly forgetting I was beside her. Her cheeks gradually flushed. She was surprised then serious and even smiled faintly. Since it was nice looking at the subtle changes in her expression, I waited without getting bored.

Just then, Lee Songha took in a deep breath as she closed the script.

“How is it?”

“It’s fun.”

I knew it. Looking at her figure which reminded me of a child who received a present from Santa on Christmas, even I was pleased.

“Then, should we go through it properly once? I will read the stage directions and your counterparts’ dialogue.”

I flipped to the page where Jung Haewon first appeared and read the stage direction without any trouble.

“Scene 17. Café. Night. Haewon sits in a corner with a haggard face…”

When I felt a strange look as I read the stage directions and the employee’s lines, I looked up. Lee Songha was looking at me with a surprised look.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re very good. You seem like a pro.”

“Huh? Ah… It’s probably because I read a lot of children books.”

Since each of my four nephews and nieces had their own distinctive tastes, this was a talent I had acquired by going around and reading them children books they each liked. From Snow White to the witch, there wasn’t a single children book character I couldn’t act out, let alone stage directions.

I never thought that it prove helpful like this.

“Now then, shall we start again?”

After finishing our first reading, Lee Songha stretched out, exhausted.

Her face still contained traces of the figure known as Jung Haewon.

Even though we had closed the script, I too was still immersed in it. When I regained my senses, my throat tingled. Now that I thought about it, I read all those long stage directions and dialogue without drinking a single sip of water.

When I went out into the living room massaging my neck, I was met with three people looking at me. Their looks were so intense I felt like I had to go back into the room.

“Oppa.”

Im Seoyoung approached me.

“We heard it from outside. Even though I don’t know much about acting…”

She glanced at Lee Songha’s room before asking quietly,

“Songha. Isn’t she quite good at acting?”

“No.”

“Sorry?”

“She’s incredible at it.”

I could confirm it now.

Lee Songha was really good at acting. I couldn’t keep count of how many times I was surprised during the reading. Her talents weren’t simply focused in acting, instead, she possessed an incredible talent for acting. If that wasn’t the case, either my eyes were twisted or I was strongly biased.

I no longer worried or was uneasy about the audition. I wanted to get her to audition quickly. I wanted to show the director and writers, who were producing the drama, Lee Songha’s acting abilities in front of them. I couldn’t wait to see their expressions

and hear what kinds of admiration they would say.

When I was thinking this, my phone vibrated.

It was a number I was seeing for the first time.

“Hello?”

-Are you the person in charge of Neptune?

“Yes, I am Jung Sunwoo.”

-I am Pan Production’s Production Producer Park Sookyung.

His timing was incredible.

I walked to the sofa with quick steps and took out a notebook and pen from my bag.

“Hello, producer. I had been waiting for your call.”

-I called you today about the audition. When would be a good time?

“Since we just finished recording yesterday, we’re free until the day after.”

-We can’t do the day after tomorrow, should we set the date for tomorrow? Ah, also…

From the other side, the producer hesitated for a moment before continuing,

-And how would you feel about auditioning for another role besides Jung Haewon?

This wasn’t shocking. Since I was worried when I read the script as well.

The importance of the role of the Interpreter Jung Haewon was much greater than I anticipated. Unlike other supporting roles which were there to support male and female lead, this character had a clear narrative, and because of this, it required a complex range of emotions.

There was no production or director who would cast someone who had not even proved her skills, someone who wasn’t even an aspiring actress but a member of an unknown girl group, in such an important role without any concern. If there was, I would be more worried.

-I don’t know if you’ve read the script, but Jung Haewon is a difficult role.

“Yes, we’ve read it.”

-There are a lot of emotional scenes so it will be troublesome if the acting is awkward. Since Lee Songha is young, how about she auditions for easier and safer roles like a part-timer at the female lead's work...

If I had received this call before I came here, I may have hesitated.

However, I wouldn't now.

The reason why I focused on this role from the start was because I had learned that Lee Songha had acted in an interpreter role through my foresight. And I had thought that she should get the Jung Haewon role to reach that goal.

But now, I had better reasons.

First, the character Jung Haewon was just too good to give up.

Second, since Lee Songha had started to become attached to this role.

And, of course, I was confident that Lee Songha would be great for the role.

"Thank you, producer. However..."

-Yes?

"We want to audition for the Jung Haewon role like we decided."

The production producer of Pan Production, Park Sookyung, held a duster and stood on a chair. When he dusted the top shelf of a dusty bookshelf, clumps of dust fell like large snowflakes. Writer Hong Jumi, who had been filling a coffee pot with water below, coughed.

"It's not like Seo Jijoon is coming, do we really need to clean?"

When Park Sookyung grumbled, CEO Kim Pansuk, who had been sitting sternly, clicked his tongue.

"They are coming from W&U. What are you going to do if they go back and say our office was a shithole? Also, even if that's not the case, she's the first celebrity to come audition. Won't I lose face if our office is in this state? Hurry up, man. They'll be here soon."

"You already said that there was a 99% chance we won't pick her for the role of Jung Haewon anyways..."

Two planning producers, who had returned from dealing with external matters, joined in.

"I also saw Lee Songha's profile. Her looks were amazing? With those looks, even if she's a little bad at acting, I don't think I'll switch the channel since it will be like watching a photo book or a commercial."

CEO Kim Pansuk snorted as he retorted,

“Everyone and their mother can be a goddess on their profiles. Photographers are so skilled these days.”

“I saw their music video as well.”

“You only know when you see them in person. Don’t you know that 9 out of 10 girl group members, whose fans praise as having the best looks, are humiliated once they in a two-shot with an actress?”

“That’s true. Since they say actresses have their own looks.”

Park Sookyung nodded his head in agreement. Just then, the youngest producer, who had gone out to buy expensive snacks for the guests coming to audition, ran in.

“Wow… Did you all see? There’s a celebrity downstairs right now. I think she’s an actress.”

“Why are you like that? You said you were the assistant director of a movie. It’s not like it’s your first time seeing an actress.”

The youngest producer gulped down his saliva at Park Sookyung’s scolding.

“Senior, she’s incredibly pretty. There’s a halo effect from 100 meters away!”

That moment, the door opened again, accompanied by a thud.

A man and woman pair entered the office. Everyone in the office instantly realized the person with the halo effect the youngest producer had been talking about was the woman. Also, they understood why he made such a big fuss.

“Hello, I am Lee Songha.”

“I am Jung Sunwoo.”

The two bowed as they greeted them. Park Sookyung threw away the duster and greeted the guests.

“I am the production producer, Park Sookyung.”

He glanced at Lee Songha, who was in front of him, as he took out his business card. She brushed her straight hair, which had become ruffled when she bowed her head, with her white hand. A perfect face was revealed from below. Park Sookyung resisted the urge to whistle.

He had imagined a cheerful, lively person since she was a girl group member in her twenties, but instead, she gave off a calm, thoughtful aura. If he had seen her without knowing her identity, he would have surely assumed she was an actress.

She would be humiliated if she was in a two-shot with an actress?

It, instead, had come to a point where, if she was cast in a supporting role, he would have to worry about the female lead. Since it would be difficult to remain in a two-shot with her without decent looks.

“Please take care of us.”

Park Sookyung turned his eyes away from Lee Songha with difficulty. The man she had come with was holding out his business card. He was wearing a casual suit and a clean coat. His style wasn’t one that made you think he was a manager at first glance.

Although he possessed a tall, clean appearance, he looked a bit unfriendly. Only, his voice was gentle.

The words ‘W&U Management Business Department Team 3. Jung Sunwoo’ were engraved on the high-quality business card.

After they exchanged light greetings with everyone in the office including Kim Pansuk, Park Sookyung guided them to the meeting room where the audition was held. Three people went in along with them, CEO Kim Pansuk, Director Shin Taekyun, and Writer Hong Jumi.

As soon as the door closed, the remaining three people prepared

coffee and snacks as they whispered endlessly. Of course, the bulk of their conversation was about Lee Songha's looks.

Then, the youngest producer suddenly asked,

"The person who came with her looked young, is he someone high up? What's his title?"

"There was only his name on the business card? He didn't seem like a road manager. He looked too composed."

"But, do higher ups normally come and see their rookies' auditions? It's not even a small company but from such a big company like W&U... Is she perhaps someone they are properly training and boosting? It looks plausible just looking at her appearance."

"Then, she might be better at acting than we thought."

They looked towards the meeting room door with curious expressions.

The audition was just about to start within the firmly shut door.

Chapter 43: Is It A Miscasting? Or A Divine Move? (4)

CEO Kim Pansuk let out a cough before asking,

“Umm, about why you wore formal clothes, did you prepare it to audition for the role of Jung Haewon?”

“Yes. It said that Jung Haewon always dressed up like a career woman.”

Lee Songha explained calmly.

She wore a formal blouse and a coat, as well as pants which outlined out her slender legs. She wore ankle boots and the heels were stunningly tall. She gave off a strong urban vibe. Her clothes, which weren’t ruffled in the slightest, revealed how strict her personality was in terms of managing herself.

“Your preparation is good.”

“Thank you.”

Perhaps it was because she dressed up like this, but there were many parts about her that felt similar to Jung Haewon’s image. Above all, she didn’t look like she was in her twenties. CEO Kim Pansuk, who glanced over Lee Songha, asked the two people on either side of him in a quiet voice,

“What do you two think?”

“CEO, look at her script.”

Whispered Writer Hong Jumi.

Their gazes focused on the script in Lee Songha’s hand. There were clear signs that she looked through the thick stack of A4 papers multiple times, and it seemed that she analyzed the character thoroughly as they could see densely written notes next to Jung Haewon’s lines.

Though, they couldn’t figure out what she wrote since her writing was bad.

“It looks like you’ve prepared quite a bit?”

“That’s a good attitude.”

Director Shin Taekyun murmured absentmindedly.

In any case, it was certain that the gazes of these three people had changed slightly due to Lee Songha’s enthusiastic attitude. If they had previously thought about holding a short audition before ending it by telling her why the role of Jung Haewon wasn’t for her, they were now ready to properly observe her acting.

CEO Kim Pansuk opened the script and said,

“I will give you a scene, so just try acting that part.”

“Yes.”

“Now, first episode, page 36. Scene 51. Let’s start with this. Since it’s easier to act if someone else reads lines as well… Director Shin, do you want to do it? Or should I?”

“If it’s fine, could I do it?”

CEO Kim Pansuk turned his gaze in the direction of the sudden voice. At some point, the man next to Lee Songha, who had introduced himself as Jung Sunwoo, was holding onto his own copy of the script.

“Since I played the role of her counterparts during practice, I think Songha will be more comfortable this way.”

Lee Songha’s expression was undoubtedly more relaxed than before. As if she was relieved.

CEO Kim Pansuk nodded his head.

“Okay, then. Jung… Uh, are you a chief?”

“I am a manager.”

“Then, let’s go with the manager reading.”

As soon as he gave the signal, the manager began to read the counterpart’s lines.

CEO Kim Pansuk tilted his head. His reading was skillful and smooth. His skill wasn’t of someone who had only read once or twice. Also, this fact was enough to make him doubt the identity of this man who said he was a manager.

Although the first thing that came to your mind when you thought of managers were road managers, even if their titles were different, chiefs and team leaders were all basically managers.

Perhaps he had a youthful appearance and was, in fact, someone who had been raised in this industry?

Just when his doubts were progressing in a weird direction, Lee Songha began to act.

“Like others who try hard to live, I will try my very best.”

CEO Kim Pansuk quickly turned his head.

Lee Songha was staring into blank space as if she was fed up.

“But, because of people like you, there isn’t anything left for me. Only me.”

Although he thought that her vocalization would be decent since she was a singer, she was much better than he expected. Her breathing was good, and her dictation rang so clearly in his ears that there was nothing to criticize. The tone of her voice was great and very charming.

Above all, she didn’t sound like she was acting. It was smooth without the emphasis or bad habits present in new actors. She didn’t seem like she was acting while paying attention to her breathing and vocalization. She was natural as if she had a talent for this.

‘This, she’s much better than I expected?’

CEO Kim Pansuk mumbled inwardly. However, that thought soon changed.

His eyes grew wider the more her acting progressed. After a long while, astonished, he thought, ‘She isn’t just good.’

W&U raised a monster.

Just when did she start receiving lessons for her to be able to act so unbelievably well at her age?

Lee Songha’s acting changed the mood in the office. The small

space was silent to the point of becoming suffocating. Besides Lee Songha's voice, not even the sound of gulping saliva could be heard. The people were focusing on Lee Songha's acting to this degree.

CEO Kim Pansuk glanced at the seat next to Lee Songha.

The manager expertly reading the lines of her counterparts. When he didn't have any lines, he would look at Lee Songha with heartwarming eyes and revealed a satisfied smile as though he felt the current mood was delightful.

CEO Kim Pansuk had found it strange that he had been so relaxed when they had come for an audition.

Thinking he definitely had a reason to be, CEO Kim Pansuk looked over to his side. Writer Hong Jumi was only staring at Lee Songha. Her expression revealed the excitement of the creator.

"How is it, Writer Hong?"

"…"

"Writer Hong. Writer Hong! How is it?"

Writer Hong Jumi, who had heard his whisper late, replied with a dazed voice,

“Uh… Uh. Pardon?”

“No, it’s fine. Continue watching.”

He felt as though he knew the answer without having to ask her. CEO Kim Pansuk, who patted Writer Hong Jumi’s shoulders, looked to his left this time. Only an empty chair remained.

Director Shin Taekyun was standing in front of the test cameras, that had been set up to capture Lee Songha from the front and the side, his face burrowed in the monitor.

To be honest, he didn’t want an audition in the beginning. He admired Lee Songha’s looks but that was it.

He placed more importance on what was inside than an actor’s looks. Maybe they could garner a momentary glance with their looks, but if they were a true actor, they needed an overwhelming charm that could pull those watching towards them.

He never expected that this girl group member would have that skill.

But…

Director Shin Taekyun looked at the monitor capturing Lee Songha.

His face, which had previously been indifferent and without drive, surged with desire. A desire to film her in a perfect filming site with proper filming equipment instead of in this small space with test cameras.

Soon, CEO Kim Pansuk said the last scene number,

“Second episode, page 48, scene 79.”

This was the most particular scene. A scene where Jung Haewon would be possessed by the ghost cat.

This was one of the reasons why they wanted to cast a skilled actress for the role of Jung Haewon. Depending on how they acted this scene, it would determine whether this scene would remain impactful or corny, garnering the ridicule of the public.

Lee Songha, who had been leaning slightly askew on her chair, suddenly opened her eyes.

Still sitting, without any movement or sound, she slowly moved her eyes. A strange tension tightly constricted the room. Soon, after checking her surroundings, she looked at her body. She raised her hand, clenching and releasing her five fingers, and tensed and relaxed her foot repeatedly before standing up.

She stumbled slightly on her first step. Her second step straightened her posture.

By her third step, she completely recovered her balance.

She straightened her back and vacantly looked down at the floor.

Her lips curled upwards in a slant.

“Wait. Wait.”

CEO Kim Pansuk broke the silence. He abruptly asked informally,

“Why did you smile like that?”

“Pardon?”

Thinking she had made a mistake, Lee Songha showed a surprised expression.

“There was no expression detailed in the stage directions. It only said to glance down at the floor because the line of sight was of a different height from when it was a cat. Why did you smile?”

“Ah…”

It wasn’t only CEO Kim Pansuk, the other two looked at Lee Songha’s mouth as well. She glanced at her manager sitting beside her. Only after her manager nodded his head as if telling her to answer without worry, did she calmly open her mouth.

“Although this cat is repaying the female lead by helping her, it has a fundamental hate for humans as it had been abandoned by its original owner. It has a lot of pride as well. If I was the cat, I think I would think this when I looked down after possessing someone for the first time.”

Lee Songha lowered her head and mumbled,

“The eyes of a human… is lower than I thought.”

That moment, CEO Kim Pansuk thought.

That, perhaps today’s audition, which he had no expectations for, might have been a divine move for the project, Cat Guardian Ghost.

The audition, which flipped their expectations, ended, and CEO Kim Pansuk held Lee Songha and her manager back to leave after drinking a cup of coffee. Writer Hong Jumi and Director Shin Taekyun said they were going to work on the script and quickly disappeared into a workroom, leaving the CEO of Pan Production and three producers to sit around a small table.

The producers were going back and forth between drinking coffee as they glanced at Lee Songha. Her cheeks were slightly flushed since she had successfully completed the audition just now. Because of this, her looks, which didn’t look human, felt more real.

“You did well, Songha. Have a cookie.”

“Thank you.”

Her manager passed her a cookie that had been brought out as a snack. Lee Songha gave a small smile as she snacked on the cookie. Recalling her age, CEO Kim Pansuk was astonished once more.

“I would have regretted it if you didn’t audition for the role of Jung Haewon. I never knew you were such a great actress.”

“Thank you, CEO.”

“Although we need to hold an internal meeting, I think everyone saw it positively so I think it’s alright if you consider as almost a certainty. We will contact you by today or tomorrow.”

Lee Songha and her manager exchange glances. Although they didn’t speak, it felt as though a few words were exchanged through their gazes. The two soon bowed their heads. CEO Kim Pansuk waved his hand and asked the question that he wanted to ask for a while.

“But, why did you choose our project? If it’s W&U, they probably get most the synopses of projects getting produced in the country, and with Lee Songha’s acting skills and looks, I feel as though you could certainly get a good role on a public broadcast network.”

Production Producer Park Sookyung nodded his head and added

in,

“That’s right. You could have joined the Monday-Tuesday drama from PBS, Mermaid out of Water, since Son Chaeyoung from W&U is the lead role in that.”

Her manager, who had been drinking coffee, flinched. Park Sookyung continued,

“Both Mermaid and ours are of the romance genre with fantasy added in. Although they are Monday-Tuesday and we’re Friday-Saturday, we start at around the same time. I’m curious why you decided on our project…”

When gazes looking for answers focused on her, she looked at her manager.

Her manager placed his coffee down and rubbed his thumb against his lips as he said,

“Since I think that this project will do better than that drama.”

Because he said it as though it was obvious, the people from Pan Production nodded along with him before halting. Then they all showed the same expression.

‘Is this person serious?’

“Umm, thank you. While I am thankful…”

“No, it’s okay. My job is finding good projects.”

“You might have found the wrong one…”

Park Sookyung whispered in a quiet voice so that the person on the other side couldn’t hear him. CEO Kim Pansuk, who overheard him with his ghost-like hearing, widened his eyes.

“Why do you act like we’ve lost already? We might be better than them!”

“CEO. Even if our drama becomes an unprecedented hit, that’s a bit… The other side is one of the most promising projects from a public broadcast network for the winter season. The fans of the original will play a large role as well, and people in this business predict that that drama will have over 20% viewership ratings.”

“… That much?”

“The amount of investment is enormous, and it looks like it’ll be advertised all over the place before it airs. Also, they say that their script is amazing too. It might be better if we just compete with the project airing on GTBN at the same time…”

The manager, who had been listening to their conversation, lowered his head a little. He even coughed as if he was choking on the coffee. Just when the youngest producer was looking at him,

wondering whether to get him a tissue or not.

The manager showed an expression that was difficult to decipher.

However, because that expression disappeared in an instant, the youngest producer simply scratched his head, thinking whether he saw it wrong.

As soon as their coffee cups was empty, Lee Songha and her manager got up. CEO Kim Pansuk said while shaking hands with the manager,

“If things become certain, we will start filming immediately after we do a script reading next month. Please adjust your schedule.”

“Yes. There is a Next K-Star recording every week, but if you could excuse us for that day, there won’t be any problems.”

“Of course, we will since that’s a schedule you already have. That’s a new entertainment show on Knet, right? The one with tons of idols.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“I hope that that program does well, and Lee Songha’s popularity shoots up. You never know. It’s not uncommon for things to change overnight in this industry. She might be a star instead of a rookie by the time we have our script reading next month.”

Of course, this was flattery to make them feel good.

When dozens of entertainment programs were broadcasted every week, no one was certain that their popularity would rise from appearing on a new show, on a cable network to boot, that didn't have any guarantee of success.

Of course, as CEO Kim Pansuk said, although this was an industry where it wasn't uncommon for some to become a star overnight after appearing on an entertainment program, the ones who enjoyed this fortune were a minority.

Even though the producers of Pan Production all thought this, they said their farewells with optimistic words.

"We will definitely watch the broadcast."

"Both our drama and Next K-Star will be a hit."

"Both Lee Songha and Neptune are going to be successful from now on."

Before he left, the manager had an odd smile as he replied,

"I think so too."

Chapter 44: Is It A Miscasting? Or A Divine Move? (5)

The director scratched his half-bald head. His gaze fell on the Cat Guardian Ghost script.

“This project, you said Luck Tosser brought it in, right?”

“Yes. I don’t know where he heard that this project was good, but he brought it in all by himself.”

Said the team 3 leader, smiling brightly.

“Now, really. He keeps switching back and forth between Lucky Charm and Luck Tosser.”

“I’m telling you he has an admirable quality to him when he works.”

Unlike the team 3 leader, whose face was glowing, the team 2 leader, who was sitting on the other side, frowned deeply. He even took deep breaths, as if calming his surging rage, whenever he heard the name ‘Luck Tosser’.

“Well, that’s that. I received a call from the CEO…”

Everyone who had gathered in the room, especially Seo Jijoon, looked towards the director, urging him to continue.

“He said to go on with the contract.”

Seo Jijoon and his manager Lee Bongjoon high-fived each other under the table.

The team 2 leader repeatedly opened and closed his mouth, seemingly unable to accept this, but in the end, he simply sighed. Since the actor himself said he wanted to do it and since the CEO decided as well, nothing would change even if he continued to oppose it.

“Let’s first set the goal to be over 5% viewership ratings. Well. Even if it doesn’t, it won’t be bad for Jijoon’s filmography. You often hear that your acting spectrum is too narrow. Which is why only similar roles are offered to you.”

“That’s right. I’m bored to death of the same dignified roles.”

“You will receive different roles after you do this.”

“That’s when things work out well, if things don’t, then it might only shatter the luxurious image we worked hard to create. Also, if characters become weird because she’s a new writer…”

When the team 2 leader was mumbling in a half-unsatisfied, half-worrying tone,

Someone knocked the door, almost smashing it, before entering. It was Son Chaeyoung with fiery eyes. She gave half-hearted greetings to the director and team leaders then immediately went to Seo Jijoon.

“Is it true you are going to appear on a cable drama in January? In a romantic comedy?”

“News spread quickly. Where did you hear that?”

Seo Jijoon replied while crossing his legs in a relaxed manner.

“Is it true? Are you trying to screw me over? Don’t you know I’m doing a drama then too?”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s not like they air on the same day at the same time anyways.”

“Why doesn’t it matter! If you and I appear at the same time, and even on dramas with similar genres, the company will divide its promotion strategy! It’s already not enough to become a hot topic in the beginning when they only focus their efforts on one!”

“What kind of fresh garbage is this? Are you the only actor in our company?”

“If you were going to do a winter drama, you should have joined my project instead!”

“I’d rather go serve mandatory military service than film a romantic comedy with you.”

When the two actors were growling at each other, Chief Jo, who was Son Chaeyoung’s manager, held her back.

“Chaeyoung, the director’s here, so end it there and sit down. Huh? Sit and talk.”

Son Chaeyoung, who had been fuming, flinched as she turned her head. The director, who was sitting in the seat of honor, was enjoying his milk tea as he watched the two quarrel, even snickering as though he found a dispute at this level adorable.

“Director, I’m serious!”

At Son Chaeyoung’s protest, the director waved his hand with a ‘Whoops’.

“The company will promote the two of you the best we can so don’t worry. No, it’s the three of you.”

He turned towards the team 3 leader.

“You said Songha is confirmed as well, right?”

“Yes. It’s confirmed that Songha will join as well. Now that you

mention it, I was on a phone call with the CEO of Pan Production before I got here, and he praised her, saying he was surprised at how good her acting was."

"Really? Considering that they called a day after her audition, it seems they really got a good impression of her."

"Who?"

Son Chaeyoung frowned.

"Who's joining?"

"Lee Songha from Neptune, we originally wanted her to act, but she quit once."

The team 3 leader glanced at Son Chaeyoung and said,

"That teacher, Shim Jungtaek, is fishy no matter how much I think about it. To say such harsh words to someone who's good at acting... If it wasn't for Luck Tosser seeing her potential, persuading her and bringing over a drama, we would have buried her talent without knowing."

"Tsk, it looks like we can't entrust any of our recruits to that man. You keep looking into it."

Listening to their conversation, Son Chaeyoung said in a calmer

tone than before,

“Why do you only blame teacher? She might have been bad at acting in front of him.”

“It’s no use if he grills them so much that they get traumatized.”

“Teacher probably did it for her sake. How many times must he have seen people mess up their lives by pursuing acting even though they are bad at it? He probably thought that if they are at the level where they should just give up, then they should as early as possible.”

When he heard Son Chaeyoung continuously take the acting teacher’s side, the team 3 leader raised his eyebrows.

And, on the other side, the team 2 leader had an uncomfortable expression.

After the meeting ended, the team 2 leader grabbed Son Chaeyoung, who was about to leave.

He looked around and carefully asked,

“Chaeyoung. Don’t tell me you got the teacher to…”

“No.”

Son Chaeyoung cut him off. Then she said in a slightly rigid expression,

“I don’t do that anymore. I only made that mistake once in the past because things weren’t working out and I was so uneasy. Team leader knows as well. That I couldn’t even sleep without sleeping pills that time.”

“Of course, I know. That was why I covered it up and moved on. But this time…”

“I really didn’t do it. That was so long ago.”

“Are you sure?”

“I swear on it. I haven’t even seen that Lee Songha or whatever’s face.”

Son Chaeyoung smiled as she shook her head. The team 2 leader finally let out a sigh.

“Okay. I only asked out of concern.”

“You don’t have to worry.”

Son Chaeyoung crossed her arms and changed the topic.

“But the person who brought that cable drama, is he that person from before? The tall Neptune manager who was such a turn-off?”

“Yeah. That guy.”

The team 2 leader nodded his head with a troubled expression.

“Seo Jijoon got the script because of him… Haa, I don’t know why this guy, who hasn’t even been in the company for long, is constantly being an eyesore.”

“He’s beginning to be an eyesore to me too.”

“You’re busy preparing for your drama so don’t worry about useless things. I’m already waiting for a chance to take him down a notch.”

Son Chaeyoung twisted her red lips.

“He left pouring cold water on my project, but could only grab a cable drama, from a new writer to boot… Now, really. What insight. I’m curious what viewership ratings that drama will get now.”

Thud.

When I told Lee Songha the news confirming she was cast for the role, she dropped the ice cream she was eating. See as she dropped something she was eating, this meant she was extremely surprised.

Worried she might pick it back up, I threw out the ice cream and turned around to see Lee Songha still standing there with a blank expression.

The other girls were creating a fuss in her stead.

“Really?! When she had her audition yesterday? Are results normally this quick?”

“It looks like the decision was quick because the production, the writer, and the director really liked her.”

“Wonderful!”

So excited that she didn’t know what to do, Im Seoyoung mercilessly patted Lee Songha’s shoulders and back.

“Lee Songha! They said you’ve been cast for the drama! Oppa, then is she going to be an actress?”

“I guess?”

“Oh, my god! It’s not some extra, but an actual supporting role! When I stole a glance through the script, there were a lot of lines as well, meaning she must have tons of air time! What if she gets all sorts of product placement offers and stuff?!”

“Calm down, dummy. If someone saw, they’d think you were the

one who was cast.”

LJ, who scolded her out of habit, poked Lee Songha’s side.

“Congratulations, Lee Songha. But I knew you’d get in.”

Lee Taehee stroked Lee Songha’s head and said,

“How great, Songha. Since you will be the new actress Lee Songha and not Neptune’s Lee Songha over there, don’t feel any pressure and try it out.”

Not only the girls, but Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader took turns congratulating her through the phone. Only afterwards did it seem like Lee Songha was regaining her senses. She came up to me with steady steps and asked,

“… Did I really get in?”

I grinned and handed her a new ice cream.

“I don’t know about the others, but why are you so surprised? You already heard that you were almost confirmed after the audition yesterday.”

“Still… I didn’t think I would get it so easily.”

“Easily, my ass. You were already good at acting, but you worked hard as you analyzed the script and even practiced so much by looking up cat videos on the internet. You were just rewarded for your efforts.”

“Still, up until now…”

Lee Songha shut her lips mid-mumble.

Well, since there were probably more things that didn’t work out than did through her efforts up until now.

While it was certain she wasn’t weak-minded or easily intimidated, her reaction was probably because she had heard that she couldn’t do it, that she wasn’t good at it, or that she fell behind to the point they ringed in her ears.

However, that would all end now.

Since she would hear how great she is and how she is exploding with talent more often than that she’s bad or that she’s falling behind.

“Didn’t I say it? That you will hear ‘Rediscovery of Lee Songha’ after you do one drama. Wait and see.”

After blinking her eyes twice, her lips formed a bright smile.

“Thank you. It’s all because of oppa.”

“Uh…”

It had been a long time since I’d seen her smile so brightly, no, did I even see it before?

My mind halted for a moment, but LJ suddenly appeared behind Lee Songha.

“I know, right?”

LJ crossed her arms and examined me at different angles.

“Was that prediction about how there would be a great fortune at the end of the year true? That a snake will bring fortune.”

She mumbled profoundly before rubbing her hands together in a circular motion.

“Is this how you do it?”

“What are you trying to do?”

“Making a wish just in case. I’m asking to win the lottery.”

“I! I want to have a permanent spot in an outdoor entertainment

show!”

Im Seoyoung quickly ran next to LJ and joined her.

“Lee Songha! Taehee unni! Hurry and pray to the Lucky Snake Oppa!”

Lucky Snake…

While I was trying to regain my senses after that shock, Lee Songha and Lee Taehee each replied,

“I hope I can continue to be busy next year.”

“Hmm… Then I want a Neptune concert.”

“I take the Neptune concert and raise it to a world concert.”

LJ added. Lastly, Im Seoyoung suddenly raised her hand.

“Before that, 1st in a music broadcast!”

I quickly grabbed Im Seoyoung’s shoulders.

“Okay. I received your wish.”

“Yeah! Mine’s been received!”

Im Seoyoung happily skipped around the living room. It looked like she wasn’t in her right mind after she heard that Lee Songha had been cast. I clicked my tongue and turned around, but LJ looked at me like she was looking at some pitiful guy.

“What?”

“I started this as a joke.”

“I’m serious.”

“At any rate, oppa has a lot of strange qualities as well.”

She said as she grinned.

Im Seoyoung, who had been running about the living room, unable to calm her excitement, suddenly stopped. Then she said with shining eyes,

“We’re doing Next K-Star, and Lee Songha’s filming a drama... I get the feeling that we will be completely different next year.”

A few days later, an article confirming that Seo Jijoon had been cast for TVL’s new project for January, Cat Guardian Ghost, appeared on the front page.

The fact that Seo Jijoon, who had only done cold, elitist roles until now, was going to appear on a sweet romantic comedy became a hot topic, and the drama's title was trending on top searches. This was definitely effective in promoting the drama.

Starting with Seo Jijoon, the female lead and other supporting and minor roles were quickly cast as well.

The fact that Lee Songha was cast wasn't widely promoted. Since there would be a lot of negative reactions, saying that she only got in because she was in the same company as Seo Jijoon, we decided to see the public's reaction of Next K-Star before determining the scale and direction of promoting her.

That was how every day passed without any time to rest.

There were a few more recordings of Next K-Star, and fortunately, the girls continued to receive compliments from the judges because they worked hard like an untiring runaway engine.

Of course, we couldn't relax because we wouldn't know how it would be shown until we saw the edited version.

Lee Songha reduced her already insufficient sleep time. She was constantly caught up with practicing for the mission with her members, her own addition training, as well as analyzing and reading the script. Although we found a new acting teacher, she always did her readings with me.

I was worried she might tire, but it looked like my worries were unfounded. She was absorbed in acting every day, and the more she did, the livelier she seemed to get as if she was a well-watered sprout.

Mid-November.

People put away their thin jackets and took out their thick padded coats. The stalls on the streets were filled with scarves and wool hats, piercing wind began to blow between the bare trees on the streets, and the Cat Guardian Ghost's first reading would be in a few days...

Then, the day had finally arrived.

November 20. 10 p.m.

There was now 1 hour before Next K-Star aired for the first time.

Chapter 45: I Woke Up, And The World Was... (1)

The front door opened, and Kim Hyunjo entered, carrying a shopping bag.

“Hello.”

“Did you finish the preparations to monitor the broadcast?”

“Yes. There are three laptops. We also checked the wi-fi.”

The traitor said as he pointed to the laptops spread out in the living room.

“How are the girls?”

“Everyone’s fine except Seoyoung, who’s uneasy.”

“No! I’m fine too!”

Im Seoyoung protested fiercely at my words. When I turned around, she was tightly clenching her phone and looking in my direction.

“If you’re fine, put your phone down. You’ve been refreshing entertainment news for an hour now.”

“They might put something up. I can’t be at ease if I don’t check!”

“That’s what you call being uneasy, you dummy.”

LJ smirked. The other three had set chicken and other snacks on the table in the living room and were sitting, waiting for Next K-Star to begin.

Kim Hyunjo placed the shopping bag he brought on the table.

“Younghoon hyung gave this to me. He said it was precious and to only drink it if we hit a peak of at least 1.5% in viewership ratings.”

“Precious? What is it? Alcohol?”

“Wine?”

When the girls’ gazes gathered on the bag with curious eyes, Kim Hyunjo brought out the object inside the bag. I glanced at it as well. A glass cylindrical bottle, around 40cm tall. It had leaves, whose color had faded white, and thumb-width roots dangling below.

I felt like I had seen it before.

"... What is that?"

"Natural wild ginseng wine. He said he personally dug and fermented them. Younghoon hyung's hands were trembling when he gave this to me."

However, the girls' faces indicated they weren't interested. It may be a precious, invigorating alcohol to some, but to girls in their early twenties, it was simply an expensive root-soaked soju. The wild ginseng wine bitterly made its exit off the table.

Kim Hyunjo glanced at the clock on the wall and said,

"There are 30 minutes left. Did you all contact your families?"

"I already did. My mom said that she even had my aunts come over to watch."

Im Seoyoung replied, trying hard to calm down. Lee Taehee and LJ nodded their heads in affirmation. The only one who didn't reply was Lee Songha.

"Songha, why didn't you tell your family?"

"I was scolded a lot in the beginning."

Lee Songha said flatly while hugging a bag of chips.

I suddenly recalled what Lee Songha said before. She had told me her parents opposed her becoming a celebrity, asking her why she continued doing something that wasn't working out. That she didn't call them ever since their previous album flunked.

Considering her situation, I understood why she couldn't tell her family. Since she was the only one who received the judges' criticism during the recording of their first mission. Perhaps it was because of this, but the expression she had while waiting for the broadcast seemed more placid than the others.

Vrrr.

My phone was vibrating endlessly for a while now. My parents back home and my brother's family were sitting in front of the TV. My friends said they were at a pub, waiting for the broadcast, and even sent me a photo as proof.

This time, it was a message from Reporter Park Woojeong.

-I am waiting after finishing my preparations to write an article! My senior who came back from Knet said that he heard the first broadcast will focus on Neptune. I will publish a great article as repayment for last time!

"Chief. I received a message from a reporter I know, and she said that she heard the first broadcast of Next K-Star will focus on Neptune?"

Kim Hyunjo and the girls quickly turned to look at me.

“Really?”

“Is that true? Really? Do you think it’s true, oppa?”

At Im Seoyoung’s hurried urging, Kim Hyunjo licked his lips and replied,

“If it’s from a reporter, then it’s not like it doesn’t have any credibility. They say Knet holds a preview screening of edited program broadcasts with around twenty people. Someone among them might have let it slip.”

The mood inside surged. I thanked Reporter Park Woojeong and sat in front of my assigned laptop. I had even registered on a membership forum bustling with elementary, middle and high schoolers for this day.

When I glanced through it, there wasn’t much of a reaction yet. Since even I, who knew that Next K-Star would get great viewership ratings through my foresight, was nervous, there was nothing more to say about the others. With thick wrinkles drawn on their foreheads, the traitor and Kim Hyunjo each moved their own mice.

Of course, the most serious person was Im Seoyoung.

“What do I do? Someone posted a comment ‘Anyone waiting for Next K-Star’s first broadcast?’ on the forum, and it hasn’t had a

reply for 11 minutes! Should I leave a reply? I shouldn't, right?"

"Gunyoung... No, I feel like you're going to have it snatch right away."

At Kim Hyunjo's words, the traitor smiled, revealing an awkward expression.

"Sunwoo. Take her phone from her."

"Yes."

I snatched Im Seoyoung's phone from her hands. Im Seoyoung clung on my leg like an addict experiencing withdrawal symptoms.

"Ah, ah, oppa!"

"Just watch TV."

"I'll only hold it and not look at it! No, I'll only check once every minute!"

"Nope."

"You're heartless!"

"I have a heart. Now go watch TV."

I firmly pointed at the TV.

While we were chatting to calm our nervousness, the minute hand continued to move without stopping.

Then, 11:12 p.m.

“Euah, it’s starting. It’s starting! Ah, I’m so nervous, I can’t watch!”

“Hey, be quiet. Or I’m going to…”

The first broadcast of Next K-Star, which we had been waiting for for a long time, began.

Neptune was the focus of the broadcast.

In a bad way.

From the start, each team quickly made their appearance one after another, then suddenly, when it was finally Neptune’s turn, a video of Lemon Girls appeared.

The broadcast revealed that they were a team who was originally cast for Next K-Star, even kindly explaining they were dropped due to public criticism from the DUI incident. Then they filled the screen with headlines and internet comments that appeared the

day Neptune was cast.

{Who is ‘Neptune’ who is replacing Lemon Girls on Next K-Star?}

A team I haven’t heard or seen before suddenly popped out. It looks like the staff were really in a hurry hahaha

An article that they were cast came out immediately after the article about Lemon Girls dropping out. What the? I’m at loss for words.

They are from W&U. I’m 100% certain their company put them on the show.

Then the video of the first time they met and the audio from interviews with other teams meshed together.

‘No one knew who they were. Everyone was like, ‘Who are they? Do you know them?’ and then, when someone said that they were from W&U, everyone was like, ‘Ahhh…’’

‘Did they get preferential treatment because they were from a big company?’

‘Didn’t everyone think that? Ah, I don’t think this is right…’

Neptune’s interview appeared the next moment.

‘Five out of the seven teams chose Neptune for last place.’

A still of Im Seoyoung’s stiffening face as she heard Producer Go Joontae’s words was captured.

“….”

A chill blew in the room. It was expected. Since the broadcast was edited with the obvious intention of creating conflict between Neptune and the other teams.

Even afterwards, the broadcast progressed in an unfavorable direction for Neptune. Reactions from community sites began to show up, but the majority of comments about Neptune were negative.

Just looking at them, I can tell they are girls pushing their looks. Why are they on this program when they don’t have any popularity or skill?

Aren’t they embarrassed appearing there when there are a lot of new groups who have the potential of becoming true K-pop stars?

If it was going to be like this, why did they call it ‘Next K-Star’? A shame to the country.

As expected of Knet, I smell another devil’s edit hahaha They just sacrificed a girl group.

It’s not a devil’s edit. Those girls deserve heaps of criticisms. Extremely disgusting.

Although they started mildly, they are getting heated reactions with this. They brought them in aiming for this. To use them to make the program a hot topic right from the start.

It was a relief I took Im Seoyoung’s phone from her.

When I sighed, the traitor poked my side. Then mouthed, ‘How is it on your end?’. I shook my head in reply. When I asked, ‘How about you?’ he briefly clicked his tongue and shook his head.

Well, if the tame community sites were like this, then internet and social media comments would be much cruder. I could picture it already. I glanced at Kim Hyunjo, and his expression looking at his screen was dark as well.

“Ah… I shouldn’t have told my mom… I told her to watch for no reason.”

Im Seoyoung murmured with a depressed voice before burying her face in her knees. LJ was glancing at the TV while punching a cushion, and Lee Songha’s hand gradually became faster as it went in and out of the chip bag.

The only one who kept her calm was Lee Taehee… was what I thought, but she wordlessly opened the wild ginseng wine and started to drink it with a beer mug.

Kim Hyunjo roughly tangled up his hair.

“Let’s wait a little longer. The mission went well. It might end in a twist after progressing like this.”

The traitor and I both nodded our heads.

“It looks like the staff was in a hurry. They dissed themselves while bringing up these comments. If you look at it that way, then there’s a high chance that it’ll end in a twist like chief says.”

“And dramatic broadcasts usually do well.”

Still, the mood wouldn’t get better easily. Eventually, we, obviously including the girls, poured the strong wild ginseng wine down our throats without any snacks. In a grim voice and after drinking several glasses consecutively, Kim Hyunjo declared he would kill Producer Go Joontae if the program ended like this.

Soon, the mission performances began.

The performances with no instrumentals were followed by the judges’ unbridled compliments and criticisms. In the viewer’s perspective, the broadcast was so exciting that they couldn’t take their eyes off it. The reactions on the internet gradually grew until it exploded when it was Sugar Cats’ turn.

Then, we saw Neptune get up on the stage.

Yeah, there will definitely be a twist. Since it was a great performance, no matter who saw it.

But, what should I do if they only showed a tiny bit of their performance and cut to the criticism about Lee Songha? Don't tell me that the thing I heard from my foresight that made Neptune receive criticisms is this?

My throat felt parched.

Accompanied by a tense BGM, the targeted comments from other teams, which appeared in the beginning, were inserted once more before Neptune's performance began. Up until then, my shoulders were tense and rigid due to nervousness.

However, the moment Lee Taehee's voice flowed out of the speakers.

My nervousness relaxed like it was never there.

"Uh..."

It wasn't only me. The depressing mood that hung densely in the living room was washed away in an instant. Everyone was dazed at first, then absent-minded before finally looking at the TV with relieved expressions.

Im Seoyoung broke the silence with a dazed voice.

“… Aren’t we doing well? Right? It’s not coming out all weird, right?”

“How many seconds has it been? I think our performance is being shown the longest?”

“Uhhh, what do we do? We’re getting tons of close-ups as well…”

The girls’ performance and the cuts to the surprised reactions of the judges and members of other teams who were watching from the seats intensified the exhilarating sense of pleasure felt from the twist.

Neptune’s performance was shown longer and was more successful than any other team.

Vrrr!

My phone, which had been silent throughout the broadcast, vibrated.

Chapter 46: When I Woke Up, The World Was... (2)

When I took out my phone, I was getting messages like crazy. I swept my ruffled hair and let out the sigh I had been holding back for the past hour.

Then I refreshed the browser.

Oh, it’s finally Neptune’s turn lol Waiting for a more laughable performance than Sugar Cats haha

Today’s highlight haha

omg?

omg

What the heck hahahaha

They're amazing. From my perspective, their skill dominates other girl groups.

The producer edited it this way to catch us off guard from the start hahaha No wonder, it seemed they were focusing on them too hard.

They have the most eye-catching visuals and carried the performances. They benefited the most this episode.

Anyone know the name of the straight-haired girl constantly getting close-ups? She's extremely pretty

Where did all those people commenting about why they were cast when they have no skill go? They were swearing a moment ago, but they're quiet now lol

I'm really curious, but why haven't they been known until now? Was their company bad?

Their company is W&U. There isn't always a reason for not becoming popular. There are some who can't get popular no matter what they do.

Neptune's skill has been revealed Won't they suddenly get popular though this?

We'll have to see about that. If the program fails, then it's all for nothing.

There are already two pages about K-Star. Although we'll have to see tomorrow, isn't already a success in term of becoming a hot topic considering this is their first broadcast?

It was as Kim Hyunjo said. Reporter Park Woojeong's words were correct as well.

Next K-Star's first broadcast was, with Neptune as its focus, a drama with a twist.

The living room became filled with wild excitement and tension.

The judges' compliments continued one after another after their performance. The edit was still on Neptune's side. Cuts of the judges' admiring reactions, and cuts of them murmuring to each other. Then the broadcast showed the insert they filmed at the company practice room and repeatedly instilled how surprised people were at Neptune's performance.

Just as they were called the best team, the background music cut off and the mood changed.

Criticisms poured out solely on Lee Songha.

‘You alone lowered the team’s average. Are you practicing properly?’

‘Since you’re so eye-catching, my vision keeps going to you, but when I look at you, there isn’t anything beyond that. It would make more sense if you had a record in acting or entertainment, but that’s not the case either.’

They caught a close-up of Lee Songha’s reaction. She was unable to fully hide her expectant expression, and her expression fell slightly as she looked at the judges. However, it was only for a moment. With a serene expression, void of any expectation or excitement, she lowered her head.

The next moment was followed by the interview with Lee Songha after the performance.

‘I will try harder from now on.’

I immediately checked the reactions on the internet.

Lee Songha is being unnecessarily criticized by the judges. Am I the only one who felt she was good?

To be honest, she did do worse than her other members.

It’s that her members were too good, I don’t think she didn’t so badly to be criticized that much. If she was in Sugar Cats and not

Neptune, then she would have been complimented.

She’s above average if we consider the girl groups overall.

She’s completely dominating other girl groups with her looks alone, isn’t that enough? Since she’s still new, she can get better if she tries harder.

If she was in Sugar Cats and not Neptune, she would have been complimented

I thought she’d cry like other girls, but she so calm. She has an iron mentality.

Although she was criticized, since they didn’t play any tricks with editing, the overall public opinion of Lee Songha was good.

“The reactions from the forums are good. How is it on social media?”

“It’s good here as well. The internet is much tamer than I expected.”

The traitor took his hands off his keyboard as he replied. Next to him, Kim Hyunjo was in a trance as he focused on his screen. Seeing as how he was constantly muttering, “Okay, good,” it seemed that it was okay to relax a bit.

“Oppa, what are people saying? Are we okay?”

“Are they saying anything about Songha?”

All the girls were looking in our direction. When I turned to glance at the traitor, our eyes met. Then we smiled simultaneously.

“Oh, the reactions are good!”

Im Seoyoung snatched the traitor’s laptop away like an alley cat.

“Let’s look at it together.”

LJ immediately sat next to her. Lee Songha, who had been eating the chicken cleanly to its bones, slowly stuck her head out as well. Although Lee Taehee didn’t join them, she was leisurely searching it herself on her phone.

After 30 seconds, the living room changed into a festive mood.

“Look at this. This is no joke. There are so many people who know our names!”

“They know because our names kept showing up in the captions, you dummy. Hurry up and go to the next page.”

“Someone said he became my fan!”

“How unfortunate. Hey, I told you to go to the next page.”

“Euah, what do I do? My name’s on a title, but I don’t think I can click it! Songha, can you do it for me...!”

“Ah, damn, this is so frustrating! Give it here.”

“You have your phone!”

“Ah, I have my phone. Right.”

Im Seoyoung, who couldn’t keep still, kept going around the living room while holding the laptop, and LJ kept spinning in place as she looked at her phone.

Since Lee Taehee was lying on the sofa like usual, I thought that she was calm. As expected of the leader. However, when I looked closer, she had one hand on her phone and other on a glass of wild ginseng wine. Just how many glasses did she have so far?

Lee Songha was sitting in a corner, tapping her phone. My laptop happened to have comments about her so I handed it over to her.

“Here, Songha.”

“Ah. Thank you.”

She readily received it and focused her gaze on the screen, only her eyes moved hurriedly. She blinked a few times as if she was surprised that people were complimenting her singing and dancing.

"Now, really. Producer Go Joontae, this man..."

On the other side, Kim Hyunjo put down his laptop and grinned.

"If it was going to be like this, he should have let us know in advance... I unnecessarily swore a ton at him. Gunyoung, you know all the staff's numbers, right?"

"Yes."

The traitor, who had been in the middle of stretching, replied right away.

"Text Producer Go Joontae that today's broadcast was good and thank him for editing it well. Also, send a gifticon to each staff member. Something like coffee. Also, tell him that we'll visit the editing room with some snacks some day."

"Yes, I'll pick out some good ones and send them."

"Ah, I was so tense that my joints are aching."

Kim Hyunjo groaned as he slouched on the sofa.

I checked the messages on my still-vibrating phone. I received long messages from my brother and his wife, and I also saw some messages from people I hadn't talked to for a while.

How did they know when I only told my family and my friends on the group chat about the broadcast?

When I checked, it seemed that I was caught on camera next to Neptune for some time after they came down from the stage.

When I opened the group chat with my friends, messages popped up one after another.

You told us to think you went back to mandatory military service. Is that the army, you bastard?

Just wait until I see you, man, you're screwed. Did you forget about your friends while you were playing in heaven?

Let me know anytime you need a part timer. I'm ready to skip my lectures.

Below that were endless messages asking for a video call and asking for a date so I set my phone to mute without any hesitation.

As I opened my contacts to call my mom first-

“Uh? They are talking about us again?”

Im Seoyoung pointed to the TV. Everyone turned their gazes back towards it.

The judges’ personal interviews commenced after the mission performances and evaluations.

Producer Song Baekjin rubbed his patchy chin and said in a regretful tone,

‘I said it during the shoot, but if Lee Songha did some acting…’

‘That girl actually got cast in a drama two days after our recording.’

We heard Producer Go Joontae’s voice, and Song Baekjin widened his eyes.

‘Oh? Really? Wow, she acts fast. If that’s the case, my evaluation changes. If she shows above average acting skills there, then it’ll be a win-win for her and her team.’

Then the scene changed. Two days after their first recording. It explained that Lee Songha auditioned and joined TVL’s new miniseries Cat Guardian Ghost, and how she successfully took her first step towards becoming an acting idol.

“……”

The mood inside the living room froze.

There wasn’t a problem with letting others know Lee Songha was cast for the drama if they were simply mentioning it as Knet and TVL were both subsidiaries.

The problem was the nuance.

The way they put it made it look as though Lee Songha took her chance at acting without any preparations because she received criticisms that she lacked in both dancing and singing during the recording. Auditioned and cast within two days. On top of that, if people thought about how the male lead, Seo Jijoon, was also from the same company, this was the same as dropping a bomb.

“No, how could…”

Kim Hyunjo stuttered as he looked at the TV with a dumbfounded expression.

“What are we supposed to do if they reveal it like that? Seriously, this man… We were already putting our heads together to figure out the best time to announce it without any misunderstandings… Ah, what a headache. Ah, I’m going crazy.”

Right then, Kim Hyunjo's phone rang. Kim Hyunjo picked up his phone with a face that seemed to have aged 10 years in these past few moments before turning his head towards the traitor.

"Did you send the gifticons?"

"Not yet."

"Don't send them. Fuck the gifticons... Team Leader Park? We just saw it as well."

Kim Hyunjo disappeared into the kitchen to talk with Team Leader Park.

"Songha, pass me the laptop."

I took the laptop away from Lee Songh since the comments wouldn't be so lenient to her now.

As if the traitor had the same thoughts, he took back the laptop from Im Seoyoung and requested the other girls stop searching as well.

I refreshed the forum and glanced through the reactions.

They say Neptune's Lee Songha was cast in a drama.

omg? When I looked at the article, it said the male lead was Seo

Jijoon. Both are from W&U. No doubt she was just added in.

Are you dyslexic? Read the article again. It says she was cast after auditioning for it properly.

Now really, who's going to believe that? Lol That's just their company's manipulation lol

They say it's her first time in a drama, yet it's not a web series but a miniseries. Chosen as a supporting role and not a minor one. In a drama where Seo Jijoon is the male lead to boot. It's obvious just looking at it.

Then what about other idols who were cast in supporting roles in public networks? If you want to bash her, then you need to bash others like Im Sooyeon and Jang Inbum.

They were bashed a ton at first. Now they've been recognized for their acting ability. Also, they were cast by producers for their newsworthiness+overseas publications as they were already popular. Does Lee Songha have that merit? When no one has heard or seen her before?

Their company added her in no matter how you look at it. You shouldn't be so protective. Lol

Bash her after you see her act. You guys made a fuss saying that Neptune had no skill and that they joined Next K-Star because of their company then disappeared after seeing their performance,

and now you're starting it again. Don't you have other things to do?

She really could have been cast after an audition. I see people who all fidgety in hopes of bashing her already.

If Lee Songha is good at acting, then these accusations will disappear.

If she was good at acting, then she would have already done it. Neptune was unknown for two years.

Bash her after you see her act

Looking at these people protecting her, it looks like Neptune really did well today.

If she was good at acting, then she would have done it already.

Either way, this was successful in becoming a hot topic. There are tons of articles too. The staff of Next K-Star and Cat Guardian Ghost are probably dancing right now.

When I looked up, Lee Songha was looking at me. Although she appeared calm, I now knew enough to know that she wasn't fine inside. I closed the laptop and, as if it was no big deal, said,

"It's fine. Don't worry."

Chapter 47: When I Woke Up, The World Was... (3)

“Re-really? Is it really fine?”

Im Seoyoung was more worried than Lee Songha, who was directly involved. No, Lee Taehee and LJ were sending me worried looks as if they hadn’t been in a festive mood just now.

“Oppa, aren’t you saying this so that we won’t worry?”

“No. I’m really not worried about it. Controversies like this will all disappear once Lee Songha proves her acting skills. Just think of it as noise marketing. There will be more people interested in Cat Guardian Ghost, and the viewership ratings for the first broadcast will be higher.”

When I shrugged my shoulders, Im Seoyoung opened and closed her mouth a few times.

“Th-that’s true...”

“Aren’t you too optimistic? If...”

LJ glanced at Lee Songha before dragging off.

They were probably worried in case Lee Songha’s acting skills weren’t enough to put this controversy to rest. Not just them,

anyone would be worried.

As there were countless idols who took a step into the drama industry with strong ambitions before failing once they showed their terrible acting skills.

However...

When I turned around, my eyes met with Lee Songha, who was still looking at me. When I looked at her eyes, which seemed to convey, ‘Is there a big problem?’ I unknowingly smiled.

We had practiced the script for the past few weeks. We had met with Writer Hong Jumi and Director Shin Taekyun multiple times and shared our thoughts on the character, and the new acting teacher marveled at Lee Songha’s acting skills every time.

I didn’t see the exact future of this incident.

So, it was impossible for me to be 100% certain about the way things would unfold.

However, I couldn’t imagine the viewers getting up in arms because Lee Songha wasn’t good at acting.

“There’s no need to take words from people who don’t know anything to heart. Don’t worry, Songha. You just need to do as you’ve always been doing.”

“Yes.”

Then, Kim Hyunjo came out of the kitchen and said,

“Pack your things. Team Leader Park is still at the company so let’s go and check how things progress.”

“Yes.”

I grabbed my outerwear, laptop and bag and got up. Kim Hyunjo told the girls, who were following us with complicated expressions,

“Well, this is something we’ve expected since Seo Jijoon was confirmed in the drama Lee Songha was cast in. It will die down soon, so you just think about the good things. We spread Neptune’s name in today’s broadcast. If we continue like this, things are going to get better every day from now on.”

“What about oppas? Oppas won’t be able to rest.”

“We are going to talk for a bit at the company before leaving. Taehee, you take care of the girls. Don’t let Seoyoung use the internet.”

“Okay.”

She replied, scratching her neck. Then, in a small voice, she added,

“Call me if things blow up. I won’t be sleeping.”

Kim Hyunjo clicked his tongue.

“You…”

“Call me.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll call you.”

We left the residence, feeling the girls’ gazes on our backs.

Unlike Kim Hyunjo’s prediction that we would leave right away, we met the morning sun inside the meeting room.

This was the longest, most nauseating night since I joined.

It took a little longer for the full drunken effect of the wild ginseng wine to set in, the vibrating noises from cell phones scattered around me gave me a headache and attempting to look at my laptop screen with letters the size of sesame seeds for hours made nausea reach my throat.

Then, I was too uneasy about the public’s opinion of Lee Songha to go home and rest.

In the end, the three of us left the rest to Team Leader Park and the PR team and went to sleep for a bit. It was 3 a.m. when I said goodnight to Kim Hyunjo and the traitor before coming to the sleeping area on the first floor and closing my eyes. That was the last memory I had.

When I opened my eyes again, Kim Hyunjo was looking down at me like a grim reaper.

"Ah!"

"Are you alive?"

"I was about to die of heart failure just now."

When I looked around with my half-opened eyes, my heart thumped once more. The traitor's face was floating on the other side of the sleeping area. What a scare. When I calmed my heart and looked again, he was staring at his phone.

With an enthralled face.

Why was he like that?

I stretched my body while tilting my head. I heard cracking sounds from my shoulders and back. Euah, I feel like I'm dying. Today was the day we were going to release the exhaustion that

had been piling up by coming to work late.

Damn. I came to my senses while inwardly cursing Producer Go Joontae.

“Chief, what about the public opinion? What happened?”

“Hmm. On one hand, it ended well, on the other, we’re screwed.”

“Pardon?”

Kim Hyunjo picked up my phone that was rolling around my pillow and said,

“Look at the real-time searches. It’s a historic event so prepare yourself.”

A historic event?

I tilted my head as I turned my phone on and freaked out.

I had 48 missed calls.

When I looked through it, the majority were unknown numbers, and the occasional numbers that were saved on my phone were from reporters I had met at drinking parties. There were some who called multiple times, and there were tons of messages asking me

to call them back when I saw their message.

I thought I had slept for half a day, but that wasn't it either. When I looked at the time, I only slept for 3 hours. It was 6 a.m. right now, not even the sun was up yet.

Do these people think managers don't need sleep? What's with their rude behavior?

Wait, don't tell me the public opinion became worse?

I quickly checked the ranking of real-time search terms.

Then, as soon I saw it, I realized what Kim Hyunjo meant. And the reason why the traitor was so captivated as he looked at his phone.

8th, Neptune.

6th, Next K-Star.

5th, Cat Guardian Ghost.

And… Lee Songha.

Her name was first on the real-time search rankings.

I waited for a day like this.

A day when the names of Neptune's members would appear on real-time search rankings. A day where articles about them would be on the main page of entertainment news sites, where countless reporters wrote and published articles about them.

However, I didn't wish for things to progress like this...

The headline on the main page and the headlines from articles beneath all had Neptune and Lee Songha's name in them.

First, I checked all the articles that were published after I went to sleep.

[Neptune member Lee Songha, Chemistry with Seo Jijoon from the same company in their new drama] [Lee Songha joins 'Cat Guardian Ghost', is it another package casting?] ["Her singing was criticized, so she's acting?" Girl group Neptune's member Lee Songha's actions are being hated by netizens]

[As the girl group Neptune, who appeared on Next K-Star and received praise for their skills which were unlike a rookie group, is trending, their member Lee Songha is swept with controversy.

When the fact that TVL's new drama starting in January cast Seo Jijoon together with Lee Songha was revealed, there are suspicions

that this may be an ‘Add-on’.

The fact that she was cast with one audition and that she has no history in acting, and the fact that she is a rookie with no popularity in the country and overseas are only increasing people’s suspicions.

On top of that, it has been revealed that Lee Songha auditioned two days after being told that her skills were lacking compared to her other members after their Next K-Star mission performance. Netizens ask, “Didn’t she jump to acting without any preparations because her singing was criticized?” as they look unfavorably upon this incident...]

I was about to go crazy.

I closed the browser within 3 seconds of turning it on. Swears and sarcastic remarks I had never heard before were taking the top spots. I calmed my shocked heart and looked through the articles again.

I saw some changes in the headlines after the company’s first public explanation.

[From Lee Songha’s side, “Cat Guardian Ghost was a project we were discussing before this.”] [‘Cat Guardian Ghost’ producer, “Not an ‘Add-on’, a unanimous decision to cast her after her audition”]

In articles referring to the press release, they wrote that Lee Songha was a member who was already receiving acting lessons and that Cat Guardian Ghost was a project they had been discussing internally before the filming of Next K-Star's first broadcast.

They also included that Lee Songha herself asked for an audition after reading the synopsis and that Seo Jijoon joined after Lee Songha auditioned and was already cast.

They mentioned CEO Kim Pansuk from Pan Production as well.

Because of this, the situation, where there was overwhelming criticism towards Lee Songha, roughly reached an equilibrium. However, the controversy didn't seem to want to die down and continued to heat up.

It wasn't only on articles, social media and other community sites had pages and pages of comments regarding this incident.

Their media brainwashing is op. They should just acknowledge she was added in after Seo Jijoon and accept criticism. No matter who looks at it, it's obvious they added her in, but since they aren't acknowledging it, they are getting bashed even more. How detestable.

They say it's not true so what is there to acknowledge? They said that there was a unanimous agreement after her audition.

They probably won't be able to handle the backlash if they say she was cast through her acting skills lol. It seems they are looking down on acting. What are they going to say if she terrible after this? haha

Those who are saying she will obviously suck at acting without seeing it, you guys are amazing.

I clicked my tongue and minimized the browser.

Some comments felt as though each character was filled with ill intent. To the point where I wanted to ask if they had a grudge against Lee Songha. If this was enough to make me, a third-party, frowned at this, what would Lee Songha think if she saw these comments...

Although Kim Hyunjo called the girls and told them not to let Lee Songha use the internet, it still concerned me.

What do we have to do to calm this controversy?

Although we could only solve a controversy about acting with acting, there was still a month until the drama's first broadcast.

Did we have to upload a video of her practicing her lines? Would people believe that she was cast after an audition and not as an add-on then?

“What’s all this fuss all of a sudden?”

The team 3 leader entered the meeting room. It looked as though he came straight here as he held his bag in his hand.

“What do you mean ‘all of a sudden’? It was a mess since early morning,”

Said Kim Hyunjo with a sunken face. The team 3 leader clicked his tongue when he saw his face,

“They are constantly in the top rankings? Songha’s first, and Cat Guardian Ghost is fifth.”

“Ah, Cat Guardian Ghost just went up to fourth,”

Corrected the traitor who was tapping away on his laptop as if there was a war.

When I refreshed the browser, I saw that Cat Guardian Ghost was fourth. Lee Songha was still first, and below her was Next K-Star, Neptune, and even Seo Jijoon. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that the aftermath of yesterday’s broadcast was dominating the real-time search rankings.

The team 3 leader went behind the traitor and looked at his screen before mumbling,

“Now, really. I thought things would pass after we took some criticism, but it looks like things will spread if we make a mistake?”

“It’s already spread everywhere,”

Said Team Leader Park, who was unable to take her eyes of her monitor.

“Team Leader Park, why is your voice so hoarse?”

“It’s because I had a fight with Next K-Star’s side on the phone.”

At those words, the team 3 leader’s eyes became even angrier.

“Those damn bastards, what are they saying on their end?”

“They are saying that they are sorry, saying that they only wanted to promote Cat Guardian Ghost since it’s a drama from an affiliate and that they never knew it would become this heated.”

“As if that makes sense. You should have sworn at them.”

“I did. But their program became a hit so they aren’t going to fuss about being sworn at by us. They say that their viewership ratings hit around 2% in the middle of the broadcast and stayed there. Since it has become such a hot topic, there will be tons of people

who will download it or watch the rerun, and the viewership ratings for the second episode will be higher. They are probably splitting their profits right about now."

Chapter 48: When I Woke Up, The World Was... (4)

"Haa..."

The team 3 leader sighed with a grave expression.

"How about from Cat Guardian Ghost's side? Did they know ahead of time?"

"No."

It was me who replied this time.

"I called them a while ago, and they said they had no clue."

I had called CEO Kim Pansuk and Director Shin Taekyun earlier.

Although we only talked for a bit, they were the same as me. They were surprised by how quickly the controversy was spreading, but they weren't worried about Lee Songha's acting skills, which was the center of the controversy, in the slightest.

Instead, they were more concerned with Lee Songha's mental state.

"They really didn't know?"

“Yes. Pan Production was hectic because of this. They said there was a lot of talk going around in TVL and that we should talk after both sides organized the situation in internal meetings.”

The team 3 leader nodded and changed the conversation.

“What are Lee Songha’s ‘charges’ so far? Is there anything else besides getting the role as an ‘add-on’?”

“Just people getting offended.”

Kim Hyunjo ruffled his hair and let out a sigh.

“There are a lot of people who think she went into the drama industry in an attempt to get popular through her looks since she isn’t as good at singing. The fans of other actors who debuted as idols are creating more of a fuss, saying that she’ll tarnish their reputation they worked hard to build up.”

“We need to end this sort of controversy early on…”

The team 3 leader suddenly took out his phone in mid-sentence. After checking the screen, he immediately answered the phone.

“Director. Ah, you’ve arrived? Then we’ll go up right now.”

He gestured to Team Leader Park and Kim Hyunjo as he talked.

Then, he suddenly looked at me.

“Yes, he’s here. Just a moment.”

“Pardon?”

“The director is asking for you. Answer the phone, quickly.”

Before I knew it, I answered the phone,

“This is Jung Sunwoo.”

-Okay, there is something I want to ask you.

…. Uh.

I thought I would definitely hear the director’s easygoing voice, but it was a bit different.

Lower and smoother.

Just when I thought that I had definitely heard it before, I remembered.

It was CEO Baek Hansung’s voice.

A few things crossed my mind in this short moment. Sung Dowon's face, my first car still waiting to be delivered...

-I heard you're in charge of Lee Songha.

"Ah, yes. That's correct."

-What do you think of her acting?

It was good. So good that there wasn't anything more to say.

I chose my words carefully to make it sound believable, but then, I heard the voice again.

-What I'm concerned about is this. Can Lee Songha put this controversy to rest with her acting skills or not?

"Ah."

-The way the company reacts may depend on that.

I swallowed my saliva and replied,

"The new acting teacher said he had nothing to teach Lee Songha. That if she really has only learned acting for a few months, then she has a latent talent for it. He said he was worried

he might push her in the wrong direction by teaching her, so he doesn't give a lot of advice these days. Also, from Cat Guardian Ghost's side..."

-No.

CEO Baek Hansung suddenly laughed in a low voice.

-I'm asking about your thoughts. Like before.

My thoughts?

What are my thoughts?

"I believe that she definitely..."

-Definitely?

"If it's Songha's acting, I believe that she can definitely put this controversy to rest."

My voice was filled with certainty that it even surprised me.

When I looked in front of me as I licked my dry lips, I saw everyone giving me a strange look.

-Okay, got it.

“Ah, yes.”

-Tell the others to come to 6th floor first and obtain the audition tape from the director of Cat Guardian Ghost. They did a camera test during the audition, right?

“Yes, they did.”

-Get the tape and come up.

He hung up afterwards.

The meeting room of TVL’s Drama Department.

General Manager Song, who has been assigned as the Chief Producer of Cat Guardian Ghost, crumpled an empty paper cup.

“Those cheap bastards. They shit on others so that they can live well? I should go over to Knet and flip a table or something…”

General Manager Song, who was mumbling gloomily, looked at Director Shin Taekyun, who was on the other side. Uncertain whether he was sleepy or thinking, he was sitting there with an uninterested expression.

“Taekyun. Director Shin. Lee Songha’s acting is really good, right? We can’t just drop her since we might lose Seo Jijoon as

well... What do we do if we uncover the veil, and her acting's terrible? Then, not only is there a problem with the quality of the drama, but we'll be disgracing our name as well."

"..."

"You did cast her after auditioning her properly, right? Don't tell me you just included her when Seo Jijoon came over..."

"If you're going to keep saying this, I'm leaving."

Director Shin Taekyun stood up. As if dumbfounded, the general manager smacked the table.

"Hey, how can you be so uninterested in these matters? Aren't you worried at all?"

"I'm not worried. So, you should stop calling me over for pointless things."

"Pointless things?! Do you go around with your ears plugged? There's a mess because of this!"

"I don't care. What are we doing when we haven't even started to film..."

"Hey! The director is worried!"

Director Shin Taekyun halted in the middle of zipping up his jumper. Then he scratched his crow's nest of hair, making it even shaggier, and let out a small sigh.

"Did you ever see me film people who aren't good at acting? If you can't believe me, there's a tape of the camera testing taken on the day of the audition. Take a look at it. I'm going now."

After speaking calmly, he left the meeting room.

But, before he could further than a few steps, an assistant director approached him this time.

"Um, senior."

"What is it now? Let me have a smoke before we..."

"What do we do? The marketing team is constantly asking for an interview."

Director Shin Taekyun frowned.

"An interview?"

"No, I told them that senior has never done a separate interview and that you don't really like those things so you only speak a few words during the production presentation, but they keep contacting me... In the marketing team's perspective, they look at

it as an opportunity to promote the drama without paying a dime.”

Director Shin Taekyun opened his mouth, but his phone rang.

He checked the caller and answered the phone.

“Mr. Sunwoo?”

After listening to what the other person had to say for a while, Director Shin Taekyun hung up. Then he ordered the assistant director,

“The video of Lee Songha’s camera test. Send that to W&U.”

“Pardon? Okay.”

“And as for the interview…”

He paused. Reading his expression, the assistant direction spoke first,

“Should I tell them that it’ll never happen?”

“No, that… Hmm. Tell them to wait for now.”

The assistant director widened his eyes at his unexpected words.

At the same time, the office of Knet's Next K-Star's production team.

The producers and writers chattered amongst themselves with excited faces, and Producer Go Joontae walked in. With a greasy hair pressed down with a hat and a scratchy beard on his chin, he looked like he had slept on the streets for a few days, but his eyes glittered with excitement.

As gazes gathered on him, Producer Go Joontae handed over the paper he was holding to an assistant director.

"Although everyone should know by now, read it officially."

"Yes. November 20, Next K-Star viewership rating. 2.4% in the capital regions, and 2.5% nationwide."

Everyone clapped their hands or thumped on the desks in cheers.

Afterwards, Producer Go Joontae handed the assistant director another stack of papers.

"This as well."

"Yes. This is the minute-by-minute ratings! The highest rating is... Huh?"

The assistant director, who turned the page over to check the

ratings, widened his eyes when he saw the highlighted one.

“Why? What is it?”

The assistant director gulped down his saliva and said,

“The highest rating by minute is 3.1%.”

That moment, incredible cheers erupted throughout the room.

Even if cable programs have been gaining popularity, only the minority could reach the viewership ratings of public broadcast programs. In reality, the majority of them hovered at around 1%.

In that situation, to hit 3.1% during the first broadcast of a newly launched program, anyone would be cheering.

While they were noisy, Producer Go Joontae called over another producer.

“We have a few good scenes of Neptune that we cut out due to time constraints, right? Hand that over to the marketing team so they can turn them into clips to post on our official site and social media.”

“Yes.”

“Make another preview. Showing a huge close-up of Lee Songha’s face…”

Just then, someone knocked on the glass door of the office.

It was a middle-aged man whose well-kept hair and luxurious muffler caught people’s attention. He was General Manager Choi, the chief producer of Next K-Star. Producer Go Joontae left a few more orders before he came out of the office.

“Hyung, did you see the rating?”

“Of course, I did. You did well. The director is happy as well. And we’re getting constant inquiries about commercials and product placements.”

“The next episode will probably have higher ratings.”

Producer Go Joontae curled his lips upwards.

General Manager Choi nodded his head while revealing an uneasy expression.

“The ratings are good, but the problem is how to manage it from now on. Looking at the public’s opinion, if that girl, Lee Songha, sucks at acting, then it won’t just be a problem for her, but even TVL might be bashed as well.”

“What do we care? We only need to get good ratings. When we asked TVL to get an actor to appear as a guest, did they? No. Also, we already got sworn at by W&U’s PR team this morning. That woman’s temper is no joke. In the end, we promoted Neptune, yet they are pissy about one of the four is getting criticized… A company needs to look at the big picture.”

Producer Go Joontae clicked his tongue and said in a low voice,

“Still, I have something ask hyung for because of that problem.”

“What?”

“Can’t hyung talk with the director and eat with the CEO of W&U once? Smooth things out a little. Looking at the reactions, it looks like there will be a lot to gain from Neptune, and we need to calm them down so they appear until the final episode.”

Producer Go Joontae lightly poked General Manager Choi’s sides. General Manager Choi frowned.

“You throw the bomb, and you want me to clean it up?”

“We got good ratings. Doesn’t the director only need to get good ratings?”

When he said this while shrugging his shoulders, General Manager Choi eventually sighed.

“You’re bullying me with ratings. Haa, Baek Hansung, if that guy is unsatisfied, it’s hard to manage him…”

“Why? When I saw him last time, he looked like he was gentle and had a good personality?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

General Manager Choi smirked and said,

“Do you think someone with only a good personality can build a massive agency starting from a single person agency in 10 years? He’s not normal, that man.”

I raised my head as I turned my tense shoulders.

Everyone, including CEO Baek Hansung, was observing the laptop on top of the table. Even though the video had long since ended, and the screen was dyed black.

The mood in the CEO’s office was similar to that day.

The day Lee Songha had her audition in Pan Production’s small meeting room. Like then, a strange silence hung in the air. When the video was playing, there some exclamations, but it was so quiet now that you could hear a pin drop.

It looked like everyone had a lot to say, but they were holding it in because of CEO Baek Hansung.

CEO Baek Hansung was thinking with his legs crossed for a while now. With an expression I couldn't read.

What is his reaction?

Don't tell me he isn't happy with Lee Songha's acting?

There was no way. Like everyone else, his eyes shined as he watched the video.

CEO Baek Hansung tapped his long finger on the sofa's armrest. The consistent thumping continued for a while longer before it stopped.

That moment, he opened his mouth.

"I think... it's best if we raise the stakes."

Chapter 49: When I Woke Up, The World Was... (5)

"What do you mean..."

Although it was the director who asked, everyone had the same expression.

An expression asking, 'What nonsense are you saying?'

CEO Baek Hansung leaned against the sofa and leisurely clasped his hands together.

"Team Leader Park, you said the public's opinion is currently divided, right?"

"Ah, yes. Although there are still more who are criticizing us, luckily, Neptune gained the image of a skilled idol group, and because Songha is so pretty, the number of people protecting her is steadily increasing."

After she answered, the team 3 leader added in with dry lips,

"There are a lot of people who are being quiet, saying that they'll talk after seeing her act. Fortunately, if there was only bad public criticism, then she may have had to quit the drama. Since TVL wouldn't keep Songha in that situation."

“That’s that, but since both the criticizing side and protecting side are quite equal, there’s no hint the controversy will die down soon. Since both sides are taking turns adding fuel to the fire,”

Added Kim Hyunjo. CEO Baek Hansung asked again,

“The first broadcast is in January, and the script reading is?”

“In four days, on the 24th.”

I answered this time. Since it was a day I was impatiently waiting for since I wrote it in my schedule, the answer came out immediately.

CEO Baek Hansung’s gaze momentarily fell on me before turning away.

“Good. Then let’s raise the stakes. Let’s see how high they go.”

“Pardon?”

“Get in contact with TVL and ask them about making a behind-the-scenes team… A team that keeps the behind-the-scenes camera rolling during the script reading, poster photo shoot, the actual filming, then creates and releases teasers one after another… No, I’ll make a personal visit to TVL.”

The director cut in with a sour expression.

“A behind-the-scenes or teaser, at most, they’ll be 30-60 seconds. You probably won’t be able to tell if she’s good at acting with that? We won’t be able to put the controversy to rest like that…”

“People will continue to watch if they can’t tell. Since they are curious.”

CEO Baek Hansung’s eyes narrowed.

“Controversy is interest, and if we can drag this interest properly until January… I think the ratings for the first broadcast won’t lose to public networks. Also, if the project is good, then it’ll ride the flow from there.”

I looked at CEO Baek Hansung with unblinking eyes.

I thought the same thing as well.

Yesterday, when Lee Songha’s name first started to rise in the rankings.

Cable channels were less accessible compared to public networks. Unlike public network dramas that are guaranteed at least 3% viewership ratings with no promotions, it was considered a success if cable dramas hit 3% viewership ratings after constantly promoting the drama a month before.

Dramas, that failed to become a hot topic but were good quality, hovered at around 1% and would only be acknowledged by those who watched them.

However, the situation would change if it could become a hot topic.

Since, as long as it became a hot topic and the content possessed sufficient mass appeal and quality, people would watch it regardless of whether it was on cable or not. As proof of this, there were dramas that surpassed 10%, which was considered to be a limit of cable channels, after becoming a craze on the internet and heated topics in forums and community sites.

That was why, since there already was a controversy, I thought that if we looked at this positively, this controversy, this hot topic, could become the driving force in making people anticipate and wait for Cat Guardian Ghost.

However, I didn't tell others, who were worried, my thoughts.

It was because there were two reasons that made me think this.

One was that I continuously confirmed Lee Songha's remarkable acting skills and concentration while we read the script together for the past few weeks. The other reason was that I knew that there was a very, very high chance that the project, Cat Guardian Ghost, would become a hit.

That was why I thought that if I told people, who weren't aware of this, my thoughts, they would say I was optimistic like LJ did.

How was it that this person could make decisions like this just by looking at her audition tape?

"If we do that and things go bad, the backlash will be quite big."

Yeah, that is a normal reaction.

When the director began to talk, even Team Leader Park said with a worried face,

"Isn't the risk... too high? Of course, if we can continue to drag this controversy like you say, the viewership rating for the first broadcast may outdo the ones from public networks, but everyone will be watching with the intention of dissecting Lee Songha's acting."

The director, team 3 leader, and Kim Hyunjo all nodded their heads in agreement.

Team Leader Park continued,

"On top of that, people who were swearing at her will be prepared in front of their TVs to look for any faults in her acting with the attitude of 'Let's see how good you really are'. If Songha makes even a small mistake, they'll create a fuss and claim, 'I knew it!'"

The team 3 leader joined in immediately,

“This will be a huge pressure on Songha as well. Although she’s better than I thought, there are times when even veterans can’t display their full abilities under pressure. Moreover, this is her first project. If she makes the slightest mistake…”

“That’s why we need to do well. And the actress needs to act well.”

CEO Baek Hansung looked at me again and said,

“And the manager needs to take proper care.”

The meeting continued for some time.

Other people, including the director, once again voiced their concerns, but in the end, it was decided that CEO Baek Hansung would be personally going to TVL and meeting with CEO Kim Pansuk, Director Shin Taekyun, and their director.

Team Leader Park rubbed her face with her hands.

“Maintain the balance of the controversy while dragging it until January… My shoulders are heavy. It’ll be a delicate situation until the drama’s first broadcast.”

“If it looks like it’ll die down, let me know.”

CEO Baek Hansung laughed in a low

voice and said,

“I’ll do an interview.”

“You will?”

“’If she was someone who wasn’t good at acting, I wouldn’t have even gotten her to audition.’ Or ‘If I were to add her to a drama, do you think TVL’s my limit?’ How do they sound? I think it will heat things up if I throw it out there.”

Everyone listened to him with frightened expressions before realizing it was a joke at the end.

Team Leader Park relaxed her shoulders and grinned,

“Things will heat up for sure. The company will be burned black. I’ll do what I can so you don’t have to do an interview.”

“Okay, then work hard, everyone.”

Since it looked like the meeting was wrapping up, I picked up my laptop that was lying on the table. Then I got up to follow Kim

Hyunjo out.

“If you’re not busy, I’d like to talk to you for a bit,”

CEO Baek Hansung said suddenly.

When I looked around, unsure whether he was talking to me, I saw that everyone was staring at me.

Even the CEO.

Me?

“I have one more thing I want to ask you.”

“Ah… Yes.”

I replied first before sitting back down. Everyone left one after another with an expression that looked like they were so curious they could die. Finally, Kim Hyunjo pointed his thumb downwards as if gesturing me to meet him downstairs before leaving.

The only ones remaining in the CEO’s office was CEO Baek Hansung and me. A silence hung in the air.

What is this?

What does he want to ask me?

Is it about the drama? Or about Lee Songha?

Just when I was thinking of various situations in order to give a perfect reply no matter the question, a question I didn't think of was asked.

"How did you know about Sung Dowon?"

"…. Pardon?"

"Didn't you refuse because you knew?"

My mind blanked momentarily before turning at full speed.

I knew that Sung Dowon only looked normal on the outside, but was very problematic inside. Well, it had already been a while since that day. I did think that W&U already knew about it since they said that W&U dropped him before Pure Star and Sung Dowon started to accuse one another in the future I saw.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

I feigned ignorance and lied.

If I acted like I knew, then it would become a headache if he

started to ask me how I knew.

When I looked at him as casually as I could, CEO Baek Hansung revealed a subtle expression.

“A coincidence, huh…”

He tapped his long finger on the sofa’s armrest again.

It wasn’t like I was being interrogated, but I felt suffocated.

Fortunately, I was able to keep a calm expression like now because my first month at work was so spectacular, and above all, my mentality grew multiple times stronger after getting my foresight ability.

“Okay.”

CEO Baek Hansung broke the silence as he nodded his head.

“I heard that you were the one who brought this drama.”

“I thought it was a good drama and requested Team Leader Park for it.”

“What should I give you if this really is a success… If there’s something you need, let me know then. I need to keep those with

good luck next to me.”

He grinned as he said,

“Then, go own your way.”

“Yes. I’ll take my leave.”

While I was picking up my laptop again, I heard CEO Baek Hansung’s voice again,

“Ah. Also, about Lee Songha. Continue to stay by her.”

Stay by her?

“It’s rare for actors and actresses to endure the pressure, stress, and responsibility from acting like it’s nothing. So the majority try to depend on something. It can be drugs or alcohol... or even people.”

My expression stiffened without realizing.

CEO Baek Hansung said in serious expression,

“Make her depend on you. So she doesn’t turn to something else.”

The moment I left the CEO's office, I called Lee Songha.

I felt like I could only ease the strange churning in my stomach by calling her.

-Yes, this is Lee Songha's phone! Please wait a mom-

"It's me."

When we told them to prevent Lee Songha from using the internet, it seemed they took her phone away as well.

When I cut Im Seoyoung's familiar voice off, the other side of the phone became quiet.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

-Ah, I can hear you... Is this Sunwoo oppa? Did you call on your cell phone?

"Seoyoung, it's been more than a month since we've met, but you still don't know my voice?"

-No, I know. I do... The contact is...

"Don't tell me my phone number isn't saved on Songha's phone?"

I felt that would be a different type of shock.

-No, it’s saved… Anyways, I’ll pass the phone to her!

What was that?

Her reaction was strange, but before I could get curious, I heard Lee Songha’s voice.

-Oppa. Are you at work?

Her voice sounded normal.

“Yeah. What are you doing?”

-Eating.

“You’re eating breakfast now?”

-No. I had breakfast a while ago…

“Ah, then lunch?”

-No. We are planning on ordering pizza for lunch later.

“… Did you perhaps read articles on the internet?”

-No. Unni took away my phone. I just got it back now.

That was a relief. So she wasn’t eating due to stress.

I sighed silently so she couldn’t hear and said,

“Once we hang up, give it back. Your mood will spoil if you read what they are saying on the internet.”

-I’m fin-I don’t care. You told me not to care.

The moment I heard her unhesitant reply, my lips curved upwards without realizing.

Her pleasant voice continued, accompanied by a crunching sound,

-I felt strange because I was cast so easily, but I finally feel that it’s real. I wish time will pass quickly so we can start filming. But…

Lee Songha paused for a moment before asking,

-Are we going to read the script today?

“We will. I’ll go as soon as I’m done here.”

Like usual, I replied with a smile.

Chapter 50: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (1)

Lee Songha's name dropped out of the real-time rankings after two full days.

It wasn't that the controversy had died down. The reason why there were fewer people searching for her name was because everyone who wanted to know already knew about this incident.

When you searched Lee Songha's name, you would be met with countless articles reprimanding her, and whenever a comment about her came up on a forum, there would be an argument spanning hundreds of comments beneath it.

So Lee Songha practiced her script in her residence for the past two days.

Meaning, this was her first outing since the incident.

"Taehee unni came back from the convenience store, and she said a lot of people recognized her."

"Really?"

"Yes. So she said she took a lot of pictures with them and gave them her autograph."

When I looked through the rear-view mirror, Lee Songha's chin was propped up on the windowsill as she looked outside. Her long, lush hair fluttered in the wind. When I looked at her eyes underneath her hair, it was difficult to tell what she was thinking about.

Other people relaxed a bit since she was so calm and since it didn't look like she was mentally shaken, but I was constantly worried.

Since it wasn't that she was fine but that she didn't show it.

"Seoyoung unni came back after going home, and she said her family and relatives created a fuss. They told her they had to give gifts to people they knew so she left 50 autographs there."

Her voice subsided slightly.

Lee Songha moved away from the window and leaned forward before asking,

"Oppa. There will be a time when I sign autographs soon too, right?"

When I glanced at her, I saw her downcast face. She seemed quite serious. This was her first time making that face since the incident blew up.

Since it seemed she was very unhappy, I replied immediately,

“Of course. There will be tons of opportunities.”

“Ah, there’s a big problem,’

She mumbled,

“I forgot what my autograph was…”

Her shoulders drooped. It was hard to make head or tails with her.

“You just forgot your autograph?”

“The company said my signature looked like scribbles so they made me one when we debuted, but since there was no need for it during the past two years, I forgot how to write it. What do I do? I need to practice it overnight.”

“Don’t stay up all night for that. The script reading is tomorrow so you need to rest up.”

I said exasperatedly as we arrived at the company. When I tried to enter the parking lot like always, around ten people were gathered together. The majority of them were young women wearing thick padded coats. No, there were even young girls there as well.

When I perked my ears, I heard a mix of both Korean and Chinese.

What's this?

Maybe it was because I was driving with Lee Songha, but I was more aware of other people's gazes as there were many people who were protecting her and tons who were cursing her as well. I was worried there were people who swore at Lee Songha out in public and not only on the internet.

We just entered the parking lot when two girls cautiously approached us. Perhaps they thought I couldn't hear them, but their conversation was worth listening to.

"Hey, you ask him. Quickly."

"No, he looks mean. I think he's going to swear at me. You ask him."

"Ah, damn it... Excuse me, mister."

I frowned at the shocking title they called me and was only barely able to accept it looking at their school uniforms.

Yeah, to them, even those in mandatory military service are misters.

“Are Blackout oppas coming to the company today?”

Although I sort of guessed it considering they were all women, but as expected, they were Blackout fans. The 11-member boy group I hadn’t seen yet even though I had come to work for over a month. The ‘ChoTongLeong’ of the idol world.

It’s been a long time since it’s been mentioned. ‘ChoTongLeong’ is a made-up word that means ‘President of Elementary Schoolers’.

In the news, I heard they had just finished their Asia tour and were arriving in Korea today. It seemed that they were waiting in front of the company to see them.

“Can’t you tell us whether they are coming or not? Please? We are going to go after we check that the oppas are healthy, really. We won’t be annoying and look at them from afar.”

“We didn’t get to see their faces properly at the airport because there were just too many people. Someone even pushed me, and my elbow got scrapped.”

Although that was unfortunate, they were talking to the wrong guy.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know their schedu…”

I was answering them politely, but they weren’t looking at me. They were both blankly staring to my side.

To be precise, they were looking through the open window and at

Lee Songha.

When I was about to hastily roll up the window, a girl mumbled,

“Oh, my god. She's a freak...”

So this is a bit strange in English. Some people say 더럽게, which means filthy, dirty, etc, to emphasize a certain trait. A better example in English would be something like ‘She’s filthy rich.’

Freak?

“Freaking pretty.”

Lee Songha looked at me once before sticking her head out the window and greeting them,

“Hello.”

“Wow, unni, you’re Lee Songha, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Holy cow. Unni, you’re so pretty! You don’t look human!”

A short-haired girl continued to admire in an agitated voice. The girl next to here kept tapping her phone, perhaps taking pictures. Since the two were creating a fuss, even the group of people muttered amongst themselves as they looked this way.

“Who? Who is it?”

“The girl from Neptune. The one who’s doing a drama with Seo Jijoon. There’s a big fuss about her right now.”

“Amazing. Her face fits on my palm. How can she look like that? It’s like she’s from a different world.”

Fortunately, there was nothing to worry about. Of course, there were some who gave her critical looks. However, those people stood far away and simply chatted amongst themselves. The ones who were talking to her up close were all smiling brightly.

I let out a sigh of relief. I was already worried since we would have to go around in public starting tomorrow due to her schedule. If it was only this much, I could handle it.

“Unni, cheer up! I’ll watch your drama for sure!”

“Can I please get a picture with you?”

“I saw Son Chaeyoung going in a while ago, but unni is so much prettier!”

I had been watching happily until I flinched at the last phrase.

Why did Son Chaeyoung come here?

Before I could think about it, the girls began to hand me their phones and begged me to take pictures. Well, my superiors did tell me to allow autographs and pictures if possible.

When I nodded my head, Lee Songha got out of the car and posed for the pictures with them. She took pictures with girls in their school uniforms as well as with girls holding luggage, who seemed to be Chinese tourists.

Of course, I was the one who took the pictures.

"Ah, mister... I became a squid. Was this the best you could do?"

'Became a squid' – When someone is so pretty/handsome/good-looking, they make the other person look ugly.

"It was the best I could do."

"Wow, how blunt."

I really did my best to take that picture. Although the result was regretful.

Since the girls seemed so torn up about the two-shots with Lee Songha, Lee Songha gave them autographs as well. She focused extremely hard as if she was creating a work of art, but it really was a serious problem. I thought that I could do better with my eyes closed and my left hand.

The Chinese tourists were even filming her like this. They kept saying something, but I couldn't understand any of it. Looking at how they kept sticking their thumbs up, it seemed like they were saying she was pretty.

After doing all she could, we finally went into the parking lot. I parked the car and undid my seatbelt, when I suddenly heard faint laughter behind me. When I turned around, Lee Songha was staring at me while laughing.

Although, strictly speaking, they weren't her fans, but maybe she was happy nevertheless?

"You're that happy?"

"They said oppa looked mean."

"Huh?"

It was an unexpected reply. Now that I thought about it, they did say that.

I was about to say I heard that a lot when she got out of the car first.

Leaving one word behind.

"You're not."

The reason why we came to the company today was because of Team Leader Park.

Because CEO Baek Hansung finished talking with TVL in the morning, a behind-the-scenes team would stick next to the Cat Guardian Ghost production process from now on.

This meant the script reading tomorrow would be the first ‘bait’.

Since it was both Lee Songha and my first script reading, we heard a few words of advice. We needed to leave a favorable impression as it would be a place where the main and supporting actors, as well as other related parties of the drama, would be present.

After our chat, I got up as Team Leader Park said she needed to talk with Lee Songha separately, but I suddenly heard an unfriendly name.

“Ah, right. Son Chaeyoung is probably still in the company. Silently avoid her if you see her. She’s a ticking bomb right now.”

“Why?”

“An article about Mermaid out of Water’s script reading came out. But she whined for an hour about how it was buried under Lee Songha’s incident and didn’t get first in the real-time search rankings. I’ve seen many unusual celebrities, but she’s unusual even among them.”

Team Leader Park shook her head, displaying a tired expression. I nodded and went down to the lounge.

It seemed everyone was busy with work as there were plenty of empty tables. I bought a can of coffee from the vending machine for myself and was in the middle of choosing a sweet drink for Lee Songha.

Suddenly feeling a chill down my spine, I turned around. Damn it.

Speak of the devil, Son Chaeyoung was glaring at me.

I was the one who was told to screw off when we first met, but why was she glaring at me? Since I felt something was fishy about the acting teacher, it was uncomfortable looking at her face.

However, I wasn't sure, and this person was a prominent actress in our company.

I hid my inner thoughts and casually greeted her,

"Hello."

The tapping sounds of her high heels came closer. Son Chaeyoung glared at me with unfriendly eyes before passing by. She didn't go far. She sat at the table directly behind me and

opened the script for Mermaid out of Water.

I was dumbfounded.

With her temper, what mermaid? She should be a witch.

Since I had already heard Team Leader Park's advice and knew that my mood would spoil if I stayed any longer, I was about to leave when I heard a voice mixed with laughter.

"An 'Add-on' controversy? So embarrassing. Was her name Songha? How's her mentality? Tell her to do well so that the image of other actors in W&U don't fall. But, with all this fuss right from the start, will the drama even be good?"

My boiling insides, in the end, calmed as if doused with cold water.

Instead, I wanted to feel how the hairdresser felt when he shouted, 'The king has donkey ears!'

Not sure how many people know the story 'The King with Donkey Ears'. Basically, a king had ears shaped like a donkey's. He told his hairdresser never to tell anyone. Unable to keep the secret, the hairdresser dug himself a hole and shouted, "The king has donkey ears!" He felt better... (Google the full story if you're interested.)

Maybe I should go up to the roof and shout,

'Before you worry about us, you should worry about your own

drama that will only get 3% viewership ratings!'

But when I suddenly thought about it... I was lucky.

I first met Son Chaeyoung in this lounge. Back then, Son Chaeyoung and Chief Jo showed me two synopses and asked me which one I thought would do better.

If Son Chaeyoung took my words to heart and didn't choose her current project.

And if I had suggested Cat Guardian Ghost to her.

If that happened, how different would this current situation be?

I might not have asked Lee Songha if she would try acting, I might not have seen a future about Lee Songha, and I might not have followed her around, trying to persuade her. If that was the case, Lee Songha wouldn't have begun acting either.

That was a close call.

I was so lucky to be told to screw off back then.

"Our drama will be good."

When I intentionally replied with a smiling face, Son Chaeyoung

frowned.

Then the elevator stopped on the fourth floor.

When the doors slid open, Lee Songha looked around. When she discovered me, she hurriedly ran towards me.

“I made you wait.”

“No…”

That moment I found out that Son Chaeyoung’s expression was strangely distorted when she looked at Lee Songha. When Lee Songha followed my gaze and discovered Son Chaeyoung, she halted in her tracks.

Their gazes met each other in mid-air.

And, for the first time, I saw loathing in Lee Songha’s eyes

Chapter 51: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (2)

The first one to act was Lee Songha. She bowed to Son Chaeyoung before immediately turning her gaze away as if she wouldn't look at her any longer.

In Son Chaeyoung's case, her expression changed as soon as she received Lee Songha's greeting. Her agitation disappeared without a trace and her lips curved upwards.

"Hey, you-"

Lee Songha quickly walked up to me.

Meaning, she ignored Son Chaeyoung.

"Oppa, we have to hurry."

Grabbing the coat I was holding, Lee Songha pulled me in her direction.

"Okay, let's go."

I nodded first and got in an elevator with Lee Songha. During the few seconds it took for the elevator doors to close, I felt as though I would be suffocated by their gazes. In front of me, Son Chayoung, who had been ignored, was glaring at me.

It was like a scene from a horror film. No, a scene in a horror film would at least pass quickly. This was like a horror film with lag.

Just then, the elevator started to move.

Lee Songha, who was still holding onto my coat, mumbled,

“Witch.”

How did she have the same thoughts as me?

Besides that, Son Chaeyoung definitely said, “Was her name Songha?” as if she didn’t remember her name properly.

“Songha, do you know Son Chaeyoung outside from work?”

“I hate that woman.”

Lee Songha said while looking at the corner of the elevator. I felt hostility beyond the loathing from before. It was a voice I hadn’t heard outside of when she acted as Jung Haewon.

“How do you know her?”

“… I saw her a few times when I was getting acting lessons.”

Acting lessons.

It was as if the thing I felt was fishy had taken shape and crawled out.

Although Lee Songha didn’t say anything and kept her mouth shut, she said she hated her with her calm personality.

If they saw each other when she was receiving acting lessons, there was no way they met under friendly terms. The suspicion that the acting teacher and Son Chaeyoung might have taken some action against Lee Songha solidified.

The elevator soon stopped. I was on my way to the car while thinking about how I could get the truth out when my side was felt empty. When I turned around, Lee Songha stood still in the elevator, not getting out.

Just when I thought she was worrying about something, she asked,

“Will something bad happen to oppa because I ignored that woman?”

“What?”

“If that’s the case, I’m going to go up and say goodbye again.”

I stared at Lee Songha with absentminded eyes before grinning.

Did my expression look that serious? Was that why she was thinking that?

To be honest, it wasn’t like I wasn’t anxious at all.

It wasn’t that I was worried that I would be sworn at but because of Lee Songha.

Although this was my first time properly functioning in society, I had learned a few things from mandatory military service and part-time jobs. No matter how crazy your superiors were, if you blindly butt heads with them, you would be the only one worn out at the end of the day.

Especially Lee Songha, she was a celebrity who was always put on the spot. We were fortunate that we were at work and there weren’t any watching eyes. If not, it might have become a problem.

If it was any other situation, I might have said this to Lee Songha, however,

“No.”

Son Chaeyoung was an exception. If Son Chaeyoung made a fuss to my superiors and I had to pay the price, then hell, I’d pay it.

“Let’s go. Before the witch chases after us.”

“Yes.”

When I mixed a joke into my words, Lee Songha’s expression relaxed. Then, with light steps, quickly came next to me.

I let Lee Songha in the car first before calling Kim Hyunjo.

Even if I were to pay the price, I couldn’t be the only one.

After a quick greeting, I went straight to the point.

“Chief. Did you find anything about Songha’s acting teacher and Son Chaeyoung?”

-Not yet. But Son Chaeyoung tried really hard to protect that teacher last time. As if she had a guilty conscience. I found it a bit suspicious so I’ve been looking around, checking whether this happened to other rookies as well…

I rubbed my thumb against my lips a few times before saying,

“That Shim Kyungtaek teacher. Could I meet with him once?”

-Hey, if you try to corner that man without any evidence, you’re

going to be hit with backlash. If Son Chaeyoung makes a fuss, then the company will be a mess. Do you have the confidence to get Teacher Shim to admit, ‘Yeah, I purposely fucked with her’?

“There’s… a method I want to try once.”

My face burned as did my back. To be honest, my entire body tingled so much I felt like I became a human dartboard.

It wasn’t even lunch time yet, but more and more people started to gather in the TVL lobby. While they were definitely looking at us, perhaps it was because we were at a broadcasting company as they simply talked amongst themselves, no one came up and asked for an autograph or a picture.

Fortunately, there wasn’t anyone who was speaking ill of us either.

When I looked around me, I glanced at the person in front of me. Lee Songha seemed like a person oblivious of the people’s gazes around her as her eyes were fixed on the script. Seeing that her lips moved subtly, it seemed she was reading the script on her own.

Although it was a script I read countless times, perhaps it was because it was almost time for the group reading session, but the mood felt completely different. I felt that she was more absorbed in it than any other time. I didn’t want to disturb her so I quietly watched her.

When around 5 minutes had passed, our surroundings suddenly

became noisier. I even heard a high-pitched scream. When I turned my head, as expected, like an ocean splitting, two people moved through the crowd.

It was Seo Jijoon and his manager, Chief Lee Bongjoon.

I suddenly recalled the time I first met Seo Jijoon.

It was shocking.

My worry about whether Seo Jijoon would be able to act foolishly was thrown out the window 30 seconds after meeting him. I completely understood what Team Leader Park said about how Seo Jijoon might be a divine move for the drama.

“Hello.”

I stood and greeted them. Lee Songha, who had been focused on reading the script, followed my lead and greeted them with a blank expression. After Seo Jijoon and Chief Lee said hello to Lee Songha, they both looked at me with the same look.

“You look a bit... excessive today.”

I bashfully scratched my neck at Chief Lee’s words.

Because it felt weird to wear a suit to a script reading session, I took out all my clothes and seriously thought about what to wear.

Then I picked a turtleneck sweater, slacks, and a classy wool coat.

I thought it wasn't bad up until then. The problem was what came after.

When the hairdresser I saw more often than my family asked, 'Mr. Sunwoo, should I style your hair a little?' I shouldn't have said okay and sat in the chair.

I really thought she would only style it a little.

"This sort of happened."

"No, no. It's not bad. You look good."

Chief Lee said while waving his hand.

"It looks like I need to use formal speech when talking to you. It's good. When you meet with the staff, don't tell them you're a manager. Say that you're a team leader, no, tell them you're a director at W&U."

Then he held his stomach as he laughed while slapping my shoulders with his frying-pan-sized hands. He kept laughing the whole time we were making our way to the script reading room on the 6th floor. When I said that it wasn't so bad that he had to laugh so much, he laughed even harder.

Eventually, Seo Jijoon clicked his tongue and said,

“You shouldn’t laugh like that. Hyung, you should dress like him too.”

“What?”

“Let me feel what it’s like to be cared for by a director.”

No, instead of trying to stop him, he laughed along with him.

“Hey, you. Clothes like that don’t suit me.”

“It’s not that they don’t suit you, they probably won’t fit.”

When Seo Jijoon said this while staring at Chief Lee’s round belly, Chief Lee snorted,

“You just don’t know since you’re so young. In your thirties, your belly is your character.”

“If your belly is your character, then hyung should be Gandhi already.”

Then they both started laughing again. They were quite the unusual pair.

Around the time their laughter died down, I glanced behind me. It seemed Lee Songha was still thinking about the script as her head was lowered while she followed us. I grabbed Chief Lee and said in a quiet voice,

“Chief, please take care of us today.”

“No, director. It is I who should ask you to take care of me.”

This man.

“It’s a joke. Don’t look at me like that, it’s scary.”

Chief Lee coughed and scratched his head before saying in a serious voice,

“The higher ups already told me to pay attention. And even if they didn’t, Jijoon and I would have done so anyways. It’s not like we’re not at fault for this mess either since the things grew out of hand because we joined the project you had already chosen.”

He said as he clicked his tongue. Even Seo Jijoon, who was in the lead, nodded his head. I received a call from them about how they were sorry after the incident broke out, but it seemed they continued to bear it in mind.

I shook my head. Seo Jijoon simply chose a good project. The one who should be cursed from this incident was Producer Go Joontae.

Chief Lee continued,

“Also, don’t worry so much. Nothing will happen. Did you get the lineup of who was cast for the drama?”

“Yes.”

“The director chose a great cast. Everyone’s good at acting, and from what I know, they are all good people. While doing this project, I don’t think we’ll be stressed because of people in the project?”

“Really?”

I knew that they were good at acting. The majority of actors were people I was impressed with after seeing the dramas and movies they appeared in.

However, I was concerned with how they were in real life. Although their images were good, an actor’s outer image was precisely just that, an image. I clearly learned this after meeting Sung Dowon, Son Chaeyoung, and Seo Jijoon during the past month.

Chief Lee rubbed his nose and continued,

“Also, our situation is a bit unique. If it’s so noisy outside, then

there are many cases where people on the inside become more tightly knit. So don't worry."

Relieved, I nodded.

Not long after, we arrived at the script reading place on the 6th floor. Seo Jijoon and Chief Lee Bongjoon nonchalantly entered the room.

There were quite a few people inside already when I stole a glance through the open door. There were staff members setting up the cameras and lights as well as familiar actors I had seen on TV.

I stopped in front of the door and took deep breaths.

While being Neptune's manager for over a month, I had personally experienced the entertainment world. I experienced music broadcasts, entertainment program filming, events, magazine interviews, and photo shoots. I had countless experiences.

So I thought that I had become used to this glamorous yet also dark world.

But, for some reason... my heart was pounding right now like my first day at work.

When I turned around, Lee Songha still had her head lowered.

Her hair, which fell naturally, created a shadow over her face, and I couldn't clearly see her expression.

"Songha."

There was no reply even when I called out to her.

Was she nervous?

"Songha, are you okay?"

When I called out to her again, Lee Songha slowly raised her head. That moment, I was at loss for words.

Her prickly mood made it difficult for people to approach, and her gloomy eyes seemed to be suppressing something. It wasn't the look of Lee Songha but of Jung Haewon, who I had met many times over the past few weeks of script reading.

No, it was similar yet different.

Although there was never I time I didn't admire when seeing her like this, even among them, right now was-

"Ah."

As if she was actually possessed by Jung Haewon, her expression

completely changed.

Lee Songha blinked her eyes twice and said,

“Sorry. I was confused for a second.”

Chapter 52: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (3)

The meeting room where the Cat Guardian Ghost script reading session would be held was already noisy.

The behind-the-scenes team was busy setting up the cameras and lights, and the cast and related parties arrived one after another, ate the snacks on the table and began to chat.

The mood was peaceful as there were many people who were acquainted with one another from other projects.

“Hey, why are there three cameras when we are only reading the script? You’re making me feel pressured. I guess I need to try really hard.”

“They say that our project is the hottest topic in the first quarter.”

“It’s not a promising project but a hot topic?”

“Why does it matter? It’s important that people are interested. I’m happy with the script, and I chose it because I thought that the drama wouldn’t fail with Seo Jijoon as the lead, so this much hype is great.”

“But…”

The actress playing the role of the female lead's friend lowered her voice, aware of the cameras,

"Do you think Lee Songha will be good at acting?"

"How tiresome. Do I even have to listen to that question here?"

An actress in her thirties shook her head as if tired of this.

"People around me kept asking me this question when I told them I was cast in this drama. I even got multiple calls from reporters, asking for comments about Lee Songha's acting after the script reading session. Haa, stop pestering the young girl."

"But we are curious."

"She probably has the basics down at least since there haven't been any talks about her resigning after the controversy. Don't you think there's a reason W&U is promoting her?"

"That's right. Also, if she really was terrible, I bet Director Shin wouldn't have even cast her."

While all sorts of speculation were being made, an actor playing the role of the subordinate of Seo Jijoon cut in,

"Now that things are already like this, I hope Lee Songha is really

good at acting.”

When gazes gathered on him, he shrugged,

“Currently the public is equally divided between she’s terrible at acting and that she’ll be good.”

“I guess?”

“So if she was criticized about her acting this much, but in reality, she’s unbelievably good at acting, then... Won’t there be a huge fuss when the drama airs? I bet the internet will explode after the first episode.”

Other actors smirked when they heard his increasingly excited voice.

“Eh, that’s going too far.”

“Yeah. Looking at the script, it’s not an easy role either.”

“Don’t put pressure on her by saying words like that. How do you think she feels right now?”

“I only...”

The actor resigned and licked his lips,

“Hope that it was the case.”

Just then, they heard noises outside the door. Thinking someone else had arrived, the actors all turned their gazes towards the door.

Swish. The door opened.

When Lee Songha first entered the room, a few actors thought that if the drama ended well, she would be rolling in commercials.

The haters who said that her looks were due to the lighting, make-up, and camera were all full of nonsense. They couldn’t help but admire her looks the instant they saw her.

Her looks were classy yet elegant, and the proportions of her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears coexisting on her face were flawless. No, there wasn’t even a need for flowery words.

Just her standing there created a picture.

The advertisers wouldn’t be able to keep their eyes off her. If she could put her acting controversy to rest and her image became better and if the drama did well enough that it and her character could boost her career as well, then there was an overwhelming possibility that she would instantly take a spot as a visual star.

That was why a few actors thought,

‘Her acting must be so-so.’

Their thoughts contained a bit of bias. That she was from an idol group, still young, and above all, too pretty.

They might have been expectant of her acting skills if she wasn’t so pretty, however, with those looks, it was possible for W&U to promote her even if her acting was a little poor as her looks could definitely overcome her faults when it came to acting.

Like how top class beautiful stars, who would be swept up in controversy about their acting skills whenever they took up a project, could still star in commercials and continuously receive casting calls from broadcasting companies.

That was why the cast of the Cat Guardian Ghost completely put away their expectations for her.

They only wished that she at least had the basics down and that she would perform well enough that she wouldn’t hinder the quality of the drama.

So, when the script reading began, the actors all thought with stunned expressions,

‘What the?’

‘This is the acting of a twenty-something-year-old girl? Someone who has received a lifetime’s worth of criticism because of her

acting controversy?’

“… Oh, my god.”

“I know right…”

Would there ever be a script reading session where the actors were this immersed in acting?

Including Seo Jijoon, all the cast members acted as though they were on the actual film set when reading their lines. Then, once they were done, their gazes would naturally turn towards one place.

To Lee Songha. No, to Jung Haewon.

After the reading began, there was only Jung Haewon in her seat. A temperamental woman in her late twenties who was already tired of life, Jung Haewon. They could see her in every breath or gesture she took.

The mood wasn’t like this right from the start.

Everyone cheered when Lee Songha’s acting skills smashed their expectations. They cheered because she could flip the current controversy on its head and the project could maintain both quality and success with her acting skills.

Then they whispered amongst each other.

“It looks like Lee Songha’s personality is similar to Jung Haewon.”

“Right? It’s pure raw acting, yet it looks like she’s actually possessed by Jung Haewon.”

“It suits her so well. It looks like Director Shin saw this when casting her.”

However, this didn’t last long either.

The role of Jung Haewon didn’t continue following one style. When she interpreted the cat ghost’s ridiculous words, she had to grasp the black comedic tones, and when she was possessed by the cat ghost, she had to be noble and elegant.

Eventually, astonished, someone mumbled,

“Holy cow. She’s just… born with it.”

“You said she’s only in her twenties. Then, of course, she was born with it. Kids like her are geniuses.”

“Life is so unfair. Her life must be easy.”

Jang Yoonok, who was playing the role of the mother of the male lead, Kim Seungwoon, frowned when she heard this.

Although most of the whispers were of admiration, some couldn't hide their envy. Especially a few young actors, who weren't that different in age from Lee Songha, even possessed jealousy.

When she looked in front of her, Lee Songha was still immersed in her acting.

In attempt to not disturb the reading session, Jang Yoonok said in a quiet voice,

"If that's all you see, then stay quiet."

"Pardon?"

"Ma'am, what do you mean..."

The actors next to her showed flustered expressions and read the mood. This was obvious as they became an eyesore to the person who was the oldest actor present and was called 'Ma'am' wherever she went.

"Of course, she's a natural. If not that, it's ridiculous for her to act like that at her age."

However, Jang Yoonok was more attracted to something else besides Lee Songha's talent.

"She's not someone who just jumps in recklessly believing in her talent. Look at her acting. She almost never looks at the script when she reads her lines."

"…!"

The young actors' eyes widened.

When they examined more closely, there was something strange about her acting. Although her script was open, her eyes didn't move following the script. Instead, her gaze momentarily hovered on the table, floor and walls.

As if there was something there.

Even though she wasn't reading the script, her lines were perfect. This was something that was impossible unless they had thoroughly memorized it. The young actors' gazes fell on her script.

Someone let out a cry.

The edges of her script were worn, and there were tons of tiny scribbles wherever there were Jung Haewon's lines.

The actors who voiced their jealously placed their hands on their script, covering it in embarrassment.

Jang Yoonok looked back at Lee Songha.

As if she didn't notice the heated gazes aimed at her, she continued her amazing acting. When it was Lee Songha's line, even Director Shin, who was known to be detailed with directing, kept his mouth closed.

It wasn't only Director Shin, but even CEO Kim Pansuk and Writer Hong Jumi, who were from the production company Pan Production, showed pleased expressions.

As she prepared for her lines, Jang Yoonok thought that a splendid actress would come out from this project.

It wasn't only the actors who were surprised.

The related parties who sat behind the actors were busy chatting amongst themselves whenever it was Lee Songha's turn while checking on their respective actors.

This was obvious since there was no one who expected Lee Songha to be this good at acting. It wasn't only them, everyone who knew about the controversy thought this way.

That was why the surprise was multiple times greater.

Since the script reading session hadn't ended yet, they were calming their agitation as they whispered to each other, but if they met reporters after the session, they could spend over two hours talking about Lee Songha's acting skills.

A chief who came with the best supporting actor from his company mumbled,

"Where did W&U find a gem like her? This industry is transparent, yet how did someone like her pop out of nowhere?"

"No wonder... As expected. That's why their director came with her,"

Said the team leader on his right.

"Director? What director?"

The chief asked the team leader in a quiet voice. As their assigned actors appeared in the same project before, they were quite close.

The team leader gestured at the man sitting left of the chief with his eyes.

"That person. They say he's the director of W&U."

"What?"

The chief turned his head with widened eyes. From beginning to the end, the man on his left was sitting leisurely as he watched Lee Songha read her script. He occasionally admired in surprise or smiled in delight.

Also, for some strange reason, he was recording Lee Songha on his phone.

He had said his name was Jung Sunwoo.

Because his outer appearance seemed extraordinary, it was a bit awkward when they first exchanged greetings, but he had definitely said he was her manager.

“Eh, what do you mean he’s a director? He looks younger than me.”

“Age is what you quibble about in school. Well, maybe he had a few strings pulled.”

“He said he was a manager when we introduced each other. Are you sure?”

“He is someone I’m seeing for the first time today, but you know that Chief Lee Bongjoon who’s assigned to Seo Jijoon? Chief Lee called him director before.”

“Uhhh… That’s not right. Wasn’t the director of W&U a balding man?”

“Maybe the position changed? Either way, I clearly heard him call him director.”

The chief wet his quickly drying lips as he turned around. Now that he knew his position, he seemed even more extraordinary.

Since he never knew if he would ever change his employment to W&U...

Once he thought this, the chief cleared his throat and asked Jung Sunwoo in a friendly tone,

“Excuse me. Why are you recording? Is it to monitor her later?”

“Ah, this?”

Jung Sunwoo paused for a moment. The chief wasn’t sure what he was thinking about as he looked down at his phone in his hand.

The pleased smile on his face had disappeared without a trace. When he was smiling, he looked like a well-behaved person, but when his smile disappeared, he clearly wasn’t the easily approachable type.

He replied slowly,

“I need it for something important.”

The chief gulped his saliva.

It was certainly a gentle voice, yet why did he hear it as ‘Because there’s someone I need to kill.’

Chapter 53: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (4)

After the script reading session, the actors each said a word of encouragement and admiration to Lee Songha. Lee Songha's expression still seemed to be of Jung Haewon, but she bowed out of habit and returned their greetings.

This merry, pleasant scene was captured on the behind-the-scenes cameras.

The actors stood in front of the cameras with faces full of excitement and expectations for the drama. Although the interviews were slightly different depending on their roles, the last question was asked to everyone.

"Lastly, please give a short comment about the project."

A man in his forties looked in a certain direction. It was towards Lee Songha and Seo Jijoon as well as the two men who seemed to be from W&U. The four of them were together and were receiving glances from other people. Although they couldn't tell what they were talking about, Lee Songha perked her ears at what the young man was saying and diligently nodded her head.

Taking his eyes off them, the male actor cleared his throat and continued the interview.

"This, I said this more than a dozen times during the script

reading session, but if there's a good vibe from the reading session, then the project will always be good. But the vibe from this reading session is just too good. Especially everyone's acting... Haa, if it's like this, then it might really-"

"Don't say it,"

Jang Yoonok suddenly cut in.

"Pardon?"

"It might bring bad luck. If the project becomes unlucky, are you going to take responsibility?"

The male actor quickly made a gesture, zipping his lips.

A similar scene occurred with other actors getting interviewed in front of other cameras.

"I'm a bit excited since we haven't started yet, but this project will be a hi-"

"Hey, hey. Ma'am told us not to say it, saying that it might bring bad luck."

"Ah, a short comment. I think this will really b-"

“Shush!”

While everyone was unable to speak, the exterior of the script reading room became noisy.

The chief producer, General Manager Song, who had been looking in through the door, quietly left.

Although he checked Lee Songha’s audition tape and he agreed to CEO Baek Hansung’s suggestion of using this controversy to promote the project, he still had a few traces of unease left in his heart.

That was why he watched the script reading session while acting like he was just passing by.

He couldn’t infect other actors with his unease when he was the chief producer.

Once he watched to his satisfaction, he made his way upstairs with light steps. When he, who had been temperamental until morning, was passing by while humming, the drama department’s producers tilted their heads.

“What the? Why is the general manager so happy?”

“I don’t know. His mood keeps swinging back and forth. Maybe something like male menopause?”

“Isn’t the Cat Guardian Ghost script reading session going on downstairs? Was he so shocked by Lee Songha’s acting?”

General Manager Song was on his way to the director’s office. After knocking, he entered the room before he got the okay to enter and said to the director,

“Director, about Cat Guardian Ghost. Should we get another timeslot? Instead only releasing short teasers, let’s make a 50-minute behind-the-scenes-“

“Are you okay?”

“The project from GTBN that got over 8% viewership ratings last time. They sent the cast and staff on a vacation to Cebu and released press releases bragging about it. We should send our cast and staff to somewhere better.”

“Why are you like this all of a sudden?”

The director, who had been going through files with a tired face, looked up.

General Manager Song closed the director’s office and said with a quiet voice,

“I’m a bit cautious since it might bring bad luck but…”

“What?”

“Cat Guardian Ghost, I think it’s going to be a huge hit.”

Noon the next day.

The first behind-the-scenes video created by the behind-the-scenes team and TVL’s Content Planning Department employees was released.

That video received hundreds of thousands of views in a few hours, was displayed on the main page of large sites, and once again broke into the real-time search rankings.

Also, it quickly spread through forums and social media.

{First look! Scene of TVL’s Cat Guardian Ghost’s first script reading session!}

-I thought I would only notice the two leads, but the supporting actors are all unbelievable.

-Are you ignoring God Joonok? Just looking at the fact God Joonok is appearing on cable shows that they put a lot of effort with the cast. Besides Lee Songha, there are no holes in this cast.

I think the meaning is pretty clear, but God + ‘name’ is usually a nickname for someone highly revered in their field.

-Taken aback by the above comment ;; Am I the only one who was surprised by Lee Songha's acting?

-I was freaking surprised as well ; I started watching without any expectations but ended up getting immersed by it. It was completely unexpected.

-I'm constantly replaying Lee Songha's part. I keep getting sucked in shiver

-Her looks could topple nations ; And she's really good at acting. Why are people swearing at her?

-What do you mean she's great at acting lol You guys are trying your best with this 1-minute video haha

-They probably picked out whatever was best from the few hours of script reading. Since TVL needs to try to put the controversy to rest.

-Wow. At this point, it looks like you're bashing her for the sake of bashing her. So mean.

-I'm not a fan or hater of Lee Songha, but looking only at the video, it looks like she's good?

-Even considering that it has been edited, I don't think she's terrible. Let's all agree with that.

-Please just do that well after practicing a ton. Then the controversy will completely disappear.

-Since everyone was making such a fuss about it, I came to check it out, and this looks like it'll be fun?

"Was I the only one who was surprised by Lee Songha's acting?"

I tried to read the comments while maintaining their tone.

"I'm constantly replaying Lee Songha's part. I keep getting sucked in shiver"

"Hey, Lee Songha! He says he's getting sucked in! Wow, that guy's overreacting!"

Im Seoyoung was creating a fuss. The makeup artist, who was zealously adjusting Im Seoyoung's makeup for the recording, couldn't take it anymore and shouted,

"Seoyoung, stay put! Your eyeliner stuck out again!"

"Ah, sorry, unni."

"Why are you making such a fuss when the person involved is listening to it so calmly?"

Said LJ as she smirked next to her.

Like she said, Lee Songha was quietly sitting down and getting her makeup corrected. From the outside, it looked like she was calm, but every time I read a comment, her lips would slightly curve upwards.

She also looked at me as if she had something to say. Like now.

Im Seoyoung urged with a bright smile,

“Oppa, oppa. Read another one. Aren’t there anymore?”

“I found some too. I’ll read you some!”

The stylist who had been diligently searching the internet at the back raised her hand.

Every time she read a comment, laughter could be heard from inside the van. The traitor, who was driving, Kim Hyunjo at the back, Im Seoyoung, LJ, Lee Taehee and me as well as the makeup artists. There was no one who wasn’t smiling.

How long had it been since the mood was this good?

It almost the first time since the controversy broke out since the mood did brighten up when Im Seoyoung and LJ squabbled with

each other, even though the mood would quickly drop back down.

However, it was different today.

After the first behind-the-scenes video of the Cat Guardian Ghost was released today, Lee Songha's acting was once again heating up portal sites, social media outlets, and forums.

This time, the scales were slightly tipped to Lee Songha's favor. Although there were still a lot of people criticizing her, those who had simply been watching this from afar had moved to protect Lee Songha because of this video.

"The timing was just right. I was already worried because today was an outdoor recording."

The traitor beside me was relieved.

I nodded my head as well and looked out the window. I saw the outdoor stage set and a group of people talking with each other.

The recording of Next K-Star today wasn't held at an open hell but in the middle of Hongdae. Today's mission was to hold a guerilla concert on an unfamiliar, confined stage for many, unknown people without a rehearsal.

A region in Korea that is known for entertainment, clubs and the like.

Guerilla concerts are spontaneous concerts performed usually by the street.

Even though I didn't think it would happen, I had been worried that a water bottle or something would be thrown at the stage during their performance. We were lucky that the public opinion was good.

"Jung Sunwoo."

Kim Hyunjo leaned towards the passenger seat I was seated on. He then glanced at the girls who were cheerfully talking with each other and said with a quiet voice,

"About what you said yesterday."

"Ah, yes."

There was only one thing I said to Kim Hyunjo yesterday.

Lee Songha's damn acting teacher Shim Kyungtaek and Son Chaeyoung.

"I talked with Younghoon hyung, and we thought it wasn't a bad idea. If things don't work out as you planned, we just need to take some scolding. It also seems like Younghoon hyung and I can cover the rest as well…"

I gulped down my saliva as I waited for his next words.

Just then, Kim Hyunjo nodded his head.

“Meet him tomorrow, that Shim Kyungtaek teacher.”

“At this rate, it looks like it will stay on the real-time search rankings until night?”

Team Leader Park from the PR team looked at her monitor and smiled in satisfaction.

The female employee poured drip coffee into three mugs as she nodded.

“This drama... Isn’t its trendiness the best? Was there ever a cable drama that became such a big topic before it even started?”

“Besides those in a series, there wasn’t.”

“I heard the mood during the script reading session was really good. That Songha’s acting was great.”

“If it’s like this... Then won’t it overtake public broadcasts’ viewership ratings on its first broadcast?”

At the male employee’s words, the female employee waved her hand.

“Eh, you dream too big. That’s difficult. The lineup of public broadcast programs in the same timeslot is too good. There’s Time

Slip and Mermaid out of Water.”

While nodding, Team Leader Park added in,

“Yeah, the quality of the Mermaid out of Water script is good. We might be able to expect a 20% viewership rating for that one.”

“The reaction from China is really good too. Although it was pushed aside because of Cat Guardian Ghost in Korea, the day an article about their reading session was released, it even reached top 3 in the overseas drama issues chart in China.”

This was possible because the female lead, Son Chaeyoung, and the male lead were quite popular in China. The publication rights for Mermaid out of Water had already been sold to the biggest Chinese online platform before its first broadcast.

The female lead said in an expectant voice,

“If things go well, Mermaid out of Water and Cat Guardian Ghost could be the top two dramas for the beginning of the year.”

“Yeah. It’ll get busier,”

Agreed Team Leader Park, but the male lead licked his lips with unease,

“Team leader. But, why do I keep… thinking about that?”

“That?”

“About what Sunwoo said last time. That he had a bad vibe about Mermaid out of Water…”

“Don’t worry about that. That was a joke. Why are you taking that joke so seriously?”

“But his next words were that he got a good vibe from Cat Guardian Ghost and that he thought it would do well.”

The laughter immediately stopped. Three pairs of eyes wordlessly rolled around.

All three of them had read the synopsis of Cat Guardian Ghost. However, none of them ever thought that the project would become such a hot topic.

Instead, they even remembered telling Jung Sunwoo, who held onto the synopsis like it was a treasure, that, while his passion was fit for a new recruit, he still needed to develop his discerning eye.

While scratching her cheek, Team Leader Park patted the male employee’s shoulder.

“Yeah, if Cat Guardian Ghost is a success, then Sunwoo’s eye for projects is amazing. Anyone will admit that. But I don’t know

about Mermaid out of Water having a bad vibe…”

“That’s right. No matter how bad it does, it’ll at least be somewhat of a success. It’s a project that can’t fail even if it wants to. Unless the director or writer lose their mind and messes it up somehow.”

Just when the female employee added that in, the PR team’s office door suddenly burst open.

Then the one known to be innocence itself, Son Chaeyoung, walked in with a vicious expression.

“Why is she here again?”

“She probably came to whine about how Cat Guardian Ghost got the top spot in real-time search rankings.”

“Haa, if I get a hole in my stomach, it’s all her fault,”

Whispered Team Leader Park before getting up and greeting her. However, Son Chaeyoung didn’t bother with the greetings and suddenly asked,

“Where did the director go? He wasn’t in his office.”

“The director? He went to China yesterday morning with the CEO.”

Son Chaeyoung bit her red lips.

“Team leader, are you lying to me?”

“What?”

“If you’re like this, I’m not going to renew my contract with W&U,”

She snapped.

Team Leader Park hid her astonishment as she let out a sigh. That was Son Chaeyoung’s repertory she had heard exhaustively the last time it was time for her contract renewal. It came out like a habit whenever something she didn’t like happened.

“Tell me why you’re like this. Why would I lie to you?”

“You said the director went to China yesterday morning?”

“Yeah. You know the electronics commercial you and Dowon filmed in China? It was time to extend that contract so he went to have a meeting with them.”

“Do you think I don’t have any ears?”

Son Chaeyoung's voice, which already seemed to have lost its already small amount of patience, grew louder.

"I heard that the director personally went to Lee Songha's script reading session yesterday!"

"... What?"

Chapter 54: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (5)

Just then, the employees, who had been watching from behind, widened their eyes. Then they hurriedly lowered their heads, narrowly suppressing their laughter with strange expressions.

Team Leader Park said dumbfoundedly,

“That’s not the director.”

“What did you say?”

“It wasn’t the director who took Lee Songha there. Cough.”

After a dry cough, she continued,

“It was Sunwoo. Sunwoo, the manager assigned to Lee Songha. We laughed for a long time when we heard that ridiculous story, just where did you hear that from…”

As Team Leader Park’s explanation continued, Son Chaeyoung’s face reddened.

The employees gulped down the still steaming coffee to suppress their laughter.

Just then, another employee in a different partition hurriedly stood up.

“Umm team leader. I think you need to take a look at this!”

“What is it?”

Team Leader Park went over and looked at the screen. Then her expression stiffened as if cold water had been poured on her.

Her eyes were fixed on an article that was released just now.

[Exclusive] A Source from Cat Guardian Ghost, “Lee Songha is a born acting genius”

… A source from Cat Guardian Ghost hinted, saying, “It’s not an exaggeration to call Lee Songha, who is currently swept up in controversy about her acting skills, a born acting genius,” and “Will dispel the controversy the instant the first episode is released,” in an interview with our newspaper. Following the words of this source, Lee Songha received the admiration from all lead and supporting actors during the script reading session…

“What is this? Where is it from?!”

“Seven Days!”

Team Leader Park hastily took out her phone and called, but

before she could exchange a few words with someone from Seven Days, the male employee's flustered voice was heard.

"Team leader, there isn't just one article. I don't know who it is, but it seems the person mentioned it in a place where a lot of reporters were gathered."

"There are already similar articles being published!"

Team Leader Park roughly tangled her hair.

This controversy needed to be carefully handled like a powder keg. That was why, after the script reading session yesterday, Director Shin Taekyun personally went out of his way and asked others to refrain from interviews mentioning Lee Songha.

But someone couldn't endure it for this short time and had already spilled the beans.

Acting genius.

It was a grandiose title that, when used to refer to veteran actors, would still bring about unpleasant glances. There was nothing more to say about Lee Songha, who was currently swept up in an acting controversy. That wasn't a compliment, it was a flame thrown at the powder keg.

When the PR teams' employees were in a fuss, Son Chaeyoung took a step back and took out her phone. Then, with amused eyes,

read through the newly published articles.

Not long after, her fierce eyes calmed, and a faint smile appeared on her previously tightly shut lips. Son Chaeyoung actually took a seat then looked at the hurriedly moving PR team employees as if she was watching a show.

Team Leader Park clicked her tongue and called another number.

It was CEO Baek Hansung's phone number, who was currently in China.

Before they made a move as a company, she needed to first inform CEO Baek Hansung about this incident. As soon as he picked up the phone, Team Leader Park explained the situation as quickly and concisely as possible.

"Rather than revealing his or her name, I find the title 'source' more unpleasant. There will be people who think that the company is trying to brainwash the public because the reactions from the script reading session were good. Before it explodes on the internet, we sho-"

-Hmm. Team Leader Park.

CEO Baek Hansung calmly asked.

-Among the people who were in the script reading session, who was the most veteran actor?

“That would be Mrs. Jang Yoonok,”

Immediately replied Team Leader Park.

CEO Baek Hansung said.

-Then find Mrs. Jang Yoonok’s personal phone number and send it to me.

More and more people crowded in front of the outdoor stage.

Although there were a lot of people who knew and were waiting because of the idols that appeared on Next K-Star, the majority were pedestrians who stopped to see this performance without knowing who would appear.

The sun was setting, and the sunset, as if someone had turned on the lights, dyed the world red.

That was when the Next K-Star guerilla concert began.

The spectators moved their shoulders according to the addictive and powerful rhythms of unfamiliar songs, and their eyes were pleased to see the good-looking, beautiful idols that seemed to have popped out from a TV.

Although there were hate comments such as ‘That person doesn’t

look as good in real life,' 'Looking at idols in real life, they are nothing but skin and bones,' and 'They all look the same so I can't tell the difference between them,' those comments were quickly drowned out.

The cheers of the spectators, who had become excited due to the outdoor concert, were exaggerated. Whenever a team would come out, introduce themselves, and perform, they shouted deafeningly and passionately waved their hands.

The heated mood even spread to nearby cafes. As the outside became noisy, people walked out onto the terrace on the second floor to watch the performances. There were even a lot of people taking videos on their phones.

"Let's go see. They say eight teams will appear. If we don't see them now, when will we?"

When a woman glanced towards the terrace, a man with wide shoulders like that of an athlete unenthusiastically said,

"Why go when we don't know their songs or even who they are. They are all just going to be kids who come out, sing for a bit and leave."

"How do you know when you haven't seen them? Let's go look. You never know. You might become so obsessed with a girl group that you will line up to get their autograph next month?"

“The hell I will.”

“Haa, fine, fine. I’m going to have a look myself.”

In the end, the woman left, and only the man remained at the table. Similar happenings occurred around the second floor of the café. It looked like there were only those who weren’t interested in idols left in their seats.

Not long after, the man suddenly turned his head and thought, ‘What the? They’re good?’

Although he was listening to the song for the first time, it made him focus on it as it drew him in. The singer was so good that she could make people unknowingly hum along with her. There was a trembling high note that made those listening to it live nervous followed by a rap, which listeners were uncertain whether it was Korean or in a foreign language, cleansing their strained ears.

“The group performing now is really good? Are they just playing a recording?”

“I know, right? This is worth listening to. Maybe I should have gone out to take a look.”

One by one, the people sitting at nearby tables looked towards the terrace.

“Ahh, I know them. Neptune. I watched Next K-Star, and they

were the ones who sang that song. I thought it was due to editing and post-correction, but they really are good at singing.”

Neptune?

The man took out his phone and searched the name he had heard just now. Plenty of articles appeared considering they were a new group, though the majority of articles only had a line mentioning Neptune and focused on a single member.

After reading a few articles, he stood up from his seat and joined the crowd on the terrace.

Because he was a head taller than other, he could clearly see below without standing in a good location. Four people in their stage outfits went around the stage as they sang. Their faces could be seen even under the lights, which emitted a similar color as the sunset.

They’re pretty?

The man crossed his arms as he watched. Although they were all pretty faces with their own unique traits, he was more attentive of their expressions than their faces. As the crowd cheered and waved their hands, they were so surprised that he could see their dazed expressions from where he was.

Especially the most petite and roundest member, she was so moved that he was worried that she might cry on stage. It looked

like she was suppressing it by straining her eyes, but eventually, her teary voice leaked out during her part.

Perhaps it was because of this, but the cheers became louder.

“It was worth the wait even though it’s cold, right?”

“Yeah. It’d be nice if they performed another song before they left.”

“They say this is a program with some sort of a popularity vote? I should give them mine.”

There were positive evaluations all around, yet a man who had dyed his hair blond licked his lips and said,

“If Lee Songha didn’t ruin her image, I think that team might gain a bigger fandom.”

A woman who seemed to be his accomplice mockingly added,

“She already ruined her image. Did you see the article about Lee Songha that was published a while ago? They say she’s an acting genius, a genius.”

“I protected Lee Songha a lot, but that’s going too far.”

“Why did a ‘source’ do an interview saying that she received the admiration of all the leading and supporting actors? Isn’t it hilarious?”

“Did W&U release it?”

“If that’s the case, then their PR team hates them. Their public image was only now getting better, but with this, it looks like it’ll suddenly take a turn for the worse. Maybe Lee Songha or her manager personally told reporters?”

People became interested in the stimulating topic. The performance soon ended, and the four members of Neptune held onto the hands of nearby spectators and greeted them.

‘How envious.’

When he unconsciously thought this, the man tapped the blond-haired man’s shoulder.

“Excuse me.”

“Yes?”

The blond-haired man turned around half-heartedly before becoming surprised at the man’s figure. The blond-haired man’s head only reached the man’s collarbone.

The man frowned as he said,

“This is how bad rumors get started and spread, by ridiculous people like you chattering about wrong information.”

“Wh-what…”

When the blond-haired man became intimidated, the woman he was with cut in,

“Are you a fan of Neptune? There was a big fuss when the article was published, what wrong information are you talking about?”

“Article?”

“We are only saying our rational suspicions considering the whole situation is ridiculous since the source didn’t reveal his or her name while saying that Lee Songha is an acting genius. It’s not just us, but there are a lot of people on the interest suspecting whether this article was released by them. Why are you picking a fight?”

“I’m speechless. Look at that article again. With your eyes open this time.”

At the man’s cynical remarks, the woman huffed as she took out her phone. Even the surrounding people who were glancing at the two sides took out their phones.

Soon, the woman, who searched the article, said as if telling him to read,

“Who’s the one who should be speechless. It says it right here. The source said she was a genius… What?”

The flustered woman blinked her eyes.

The content of the main article about Lee Songha was a bit different from before.

[Exclusive] Jang Yoonok “Lee Songha is a born actress and a hard-working genius.”

… Veteran actress Jang Yoonok opened her mouth to talk about Lee Songha’s acting skills that have once again become a hot topic after the script reading session.

Jang Yoonok praised Lee Songha, saying “Lee Songha, that girl, is a naturally talented actress,” and revealed, “She is also a hard-working genius who had almost memorized all her lines for the first script reading session. Everyone expressed their admiration for her.”

She also added, “I hope that there will be more talented, passionate, new actresses like her in the future.” …

“Do you have anything more to say?”

“…”

At the man’s question, the hesitant woman lowered her head and left the terrace with her group. People clicked their tongue as they watched their fleeing figures, and at the same time, people who checked the article mumbled,

“So Jang Yoonok personally had an interview. For them to say that it was media brainwashing or leaked by Lee Songha herself…”

“The internet is creating a fuss too. Wow, look at how people bashed her without knowing anything. So this is how rumors start. She must have felt so depressed.”

“But about Lee Songha, do you think she really is good at acting? I mean Jang Yoonok probably won’t lie. Well, she might have given her a higher evaluation so their project is more successful.”

“I might have to watch this drama because of how curious I am.”

Chapter 55: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (6)

At the same time. At W&U's PR team office.

While Team Leader Park had gone out to call Jang Yoonok and say thank you, the female and male employees finally let out sighs of relief.

Since Lee Songha's controversy once again turned into a heated debate, scales were gradually leaning towards Lee Songha's favor as Jang Yoonok's interview spread.

Lee Songha's name was still first on the real-time search rankings, and Cat Guardian Ghost was rising in ranking again. This was because there were people searching for the date of its first broadcast, saying that they would absolutely watch the broadcast to confirm Lee Songha's acting skills.

The female PR employee relaxed as she said,

"It looks like Songha really was good at acting since Mrs. Jang Yoonok is really picky. If she wasn't impressed with her acting, then I don't think she would have done an interview even if it was our CEO's request."

"At this rate, Songha might surge in popularity and instantly become a first-rate actress for all we know."

At his words, the female employee smiled brightly,

“That’ll be great. There are lots of projects we miss and are taken by other companies because our actors can’t fit them in their schedules. It was a shame. Also, since Songha’s image isn’t fixed, she could pull off Ms. Joohee or Sora’s image, even Son Chaeyou-“

“Hey, hey.”

The female employee did a double take before closing her mouth. Then she carefully turned her head.

Son Chaeyoung was still sitting in the corner of the PR team office.

Unlike before, she was staring at her phone with gloomy eyes.

The path to the van after coming down from the stage was very far.

The girls were buried in a crowd of about ten people.

They gave autographs, shook hands, and took pictures.

Even though the bodyguard scolded them, saying that there might be an accident since the path was so narrow and to quickly get in the car, the people as well as the girls stayed put and didn’t think about moving.

Well, the girls didn't have any immunity against such heated reactions.

We endured it until the next girl group went up on stage before the traitor, Kim Hyunjo and I dragged them from the front and pushed them from the back until we got them in the van.

"It's a complete madhouse."

When I closed the door and let out a sigh, the traitor next to me grinned.

"With this much? You should go check out Blackout's autograph event later."

"Why? How is it there?"

"This place is like a school of minnows while it's like a school of piranhas there."

He said as he looked off into the distance.

A school of piranhas. Would there be a day I would be surrounded by them?

The traitor got in the driver's seat while I went around to get in the passenger's seat.

“Excuse me.”

When someone called out to me, I turned around and instantly regretted it. Through a half-opened window of a white van parked nearby, Sugar Cats Han Saetbyeol was looking at me with a bright smile.

“Is Lee Songha okay? Last time I checked, there was a big fuss.”

“Pardon?”

“A source from Cat Guardian Ghost praised Lee Songha, saying she was an acting genius. Is she really good? Sh-“

“Yes. She’s really good.”

As the van started, I quickly ended the exchange.

“If you’re still curious, look at the article that was released afterwards.”

I replied with a friendliness I dragged out from within my soul and quickly turned my back on her.

When I opened the door and got in the passenger’s seat, the mood at the back was somewhat of a mess. I turned around to see what was going on here and became surprised. Im Seoyoung was

biting her lower lip as she cried.

I had thought it was serious a while ago, but the dam finally broke. Her cheeks were soaked.

With a flustered expression, the traitor asked,

“Why… Why are you crying? Did something happen outside?”

“No, she says she’s crying because she’s so happy. Because she’s happy.”

Kim Hyunjo smiled as he said,

“The day Neptune has their own concert; she will probably sob and wail on top of the stage.”

Im Seoyoung slapped Kim Hyunjo’s back multiple times. Kim Hyunjo handed her a tissue.

“Okay, stop crying. Your eye makeup is running and it’s all bl-It’s fine?”

“Yeah. It might be because it’s waterproof…”

Im Seoyoung said in a half-crying voice.

Everyone who watched this burst into laughter.

To be honest, everyone had been worried a great deal before they got on stage since the situation changed once that source or whatever said she was a genius right after the public's opinion of Lee Songha had become slightly better.

Once I get a hold of that person…

Either way, because of that, even Lee Taehee, who didn't get nervous easily, had a stiff expression, and Im Seoyoung was nervous as she gazed out at the audience, saying she was scared that the cheering audience might become quiet when they went up.

However, her worries were for naught as the mood was great.

Although we didn't know how long these cheering people would remember their performance and whether they would look up Neptune's name on the internet, today's performance was a success.

To the point where they could be happy and proud of themselves.

"Do you think there were any of our fans in the audience? Will there be people who will come watch us again?"

Said Im Seoyoung as she wiped her tears with the tissue. LJ shrugged her shoulders and said,

“Don’t get your hopes up too high. They say the higher your expectations, the more disappointed you become.”

“I can’t even get my hopes up however I want? You never know since there were so many people!”

“This is Hongdae. You might get a crowd that size if you turned on some music and blew bubbles.”

Yet, even as she said this, LJ was happier than ever. The lingering aftereffect of the performance didn’t easily fade, and she was even faintly humming.

“I don’t know if he was a fan or not.”

Lee Taehee, who was slumped in her designated seat at the very back, leaned forward and handed Lee Songha something.

It was a small bag of cookies sold in cafés. When Lee Songha stared at it, Lee Taehee nodded her head as if telling her to eat it. Lee Songha carefully ripped the plastic and began to eat a coin-sized cookie.

I looked at her vacantly.

Although they had all gone up with heavy hearts, the one who had the heaviest heart was probably Lee Songha since it was her

controversy that impacted on Neptune.

Although all I could do was comfort her before, I now had something that could lighten her heart.

When I quietly gestured at her with my hand, Lee Songha leaned towards me.

Just then, Lee Taehee scratched her neck and said,

“Someone who was tall like an athlete gave it to me, saying it was a present. Those cookies.”

“Why are you saying that now, unni?! Don’t eat it! Don’t eat it!”

Startled, Im Seoyoung snatched the bag of cookies from Lee Songha’s hand.

“It’s the first present we received after our performance. We have to take it home!”

“It’ll rot, dummy.”

While the girls, as well as Kim Hyunjo and the traitor, were chatting noisily around a bag of cookies, Lee Songha approached me with a hopeless face as her food had been snatched from her right under her nose.

Then she stretched her hand out.

On top of her white hand was half a cookie.

“Do you want it?”

“No, you were only able to save that. You eat it.”

As if she had been waiting for my words, the cookie entered Lee Songha’s mouth. I momentarily laughed before taking my phone out from my pocket. I opened the new exclusive article with Mrs. Jang Yoonok’s interview and showed it to her.

“Songha, look at this.”

Lee Songha looked down at it with a strange look.

Not long after, her lips, smeared with cookie crumbs, opened slightly.

Lee Songha grabbed my phone and couldn’t take her eyes off the article for a long time.

“It’s probably been over 50 years since Mrs. Jang Yoonok began acting.”

“Ah.”

“An acting veteran like her complimented your acting. If it’s like this, then it becomes certain that your previous acting teacher was crazy. Now there is no need for you remember anything he said.”

It would be better if she forgot all his words that traumatized her.

Of course, even if Lee Songha forgot, I wouldn’t.

After having waited so long, how could I forget it so easily?

While I was thinking these insidious thoughts, Lee Songha’s lips moved slightly. I could hear her whispering voice once I perked my ears.

“Oppa’s words…”

“Hmm?”

“Always seem right.”

Then she stared directly at me. My neck itched.

“No, it’s… not like that.”

Lee Songha smiled faintly at my words while she mumbled that I was.

In the end, I simply laughed it off.

As my mind relaxed, a simulation on how I would catch Teacher Shim Kyungtaek ran even faster in my head.

Yeah, tomorrow… Let’s put an end to this.

The next day, 11 a.m.

Instead of being at work, I was sitting on a sofa in an office of an art school.

My hair was a mess as if I had just gotten up, and I had come wearing the same clothes as yesterday. The finishing touch was spraying soju instead of cologne.

Even when I saw my appearance, I looked like someone who had been drinking all night.

In front of me was a man in his forties sitting in an intimidating posture. He wore an expensive suit and had a thick mustache and the good looks expected of a former musical actor.

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek. No, he was someone who was even called a professor here.

“What was the important thing you had to say…?”

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek scanned my figure as he asked. I scratched the back of my head. Then I acted like a new recruit who caused an accident.

"That is, I came here because of a problem regarding Lee Songha."

"Lee Songha? I was curious why you suddenly came here."

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek let out a sigh and said,

"I believe I apologized, saying that I felt my words were a bit too harsh..."

"It's not because of that."

I might have sworn at him just then.

After traumatizing a girl like that, 'my words were a bit too harsh'?

Like hell that was an apology. How was that saying sorry?

"There's such a big fuss about Lee Songha's acting skill right now. It became a heated topic once again when Mrs. Jang Yoonok did an interview yesterday, personally saying she was born with acting talent."

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek's expression became uncomfortable.

Of course, it would.

Since the actress he said wasn't talented was praised as a genius by a veteran actress, who knew the entertainment world like the back of her hand.

He was only able to sit there like that because of his thick face. If it was anyone else, they would have died from embarrassment.

"So?"

"I had a couple drinks with a reporter yesterday... He was very curious why Songha never pursued acting during their 2 years of obscurity."

As my lies continued, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek's expression stiffened.

I scratched the back of my head again and said,

"I was so drunk that I think I made a mistake."

"A mistake? What kind of mistake did you make?"

I threw a pile of shit at the clearly taken aback Teacher Shim Kyungtaek.

“That Lee Songha gave up on acting after her previous acting teacher told her to never step foot in the acting industry… Something like that.”

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek’s face turned sour.

“The problem is that after hearing that, the reporter said that the teacher might have had ulterior motives and kept asking me who he was.”

“What?!”

He was so surprised that he was staring at me with glaring eyes.

Currently, Lee Songha’s name was the most enticing bait for reporters. Once an exclusive article about her was published, other similar articles would quickly cover the news pages. Then netizens would spread and plaster these articles everywhere.

But what would happen if a rumor that Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, who previously taught Lee Songha, severely criticized her to the point of traumatizing her and blocked her path as an actress?

Especially if this somehow involved Son Chaeyoung, then wouldn’t he express a reaction… beyond being angry at my words?

Since he wouldn’t want this to be exposed to the public.

I attentively examined Teacher Shim Kyungtaek’s reaction before recalling something else I wanted to throw at him.

“It seems I let it slip because I was too drunk. I came here because I thought I should at least apologize.”

Here you go, an apology.

Chapter 56: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (7)

I observed Teacher Shim Kyungtaek's reaction.

This wasn't much compared to when I saw the future with my foresight ability.

His fingers hurriedly tapped on the laptop on top of the table. His eyes rolled around rapidly, and soon, he let out the sigh he had been holding back. He probably had been checking to see if his name had come up in any article.

Ah. When I looked at his relieved face, I really wanted to call Reporter Park Woojeong.

His smooth, unchapped lips moved slightly. Below his stylish suit sleeve was a tightly clenched fist with bulging veins. His sharp eyes soon found their target. Of course, it was me.

"Who is it?"

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek stared at me as he urged,

"That reporter, who is it? Call him immediately and tell him not to write that article."

"I came here because I can't."

I squeezed out a regrettable expression as I acted like I was looking at my watch.

“I wanted to apologize before the article was published.”

“You crazy bastard! Do you think this is something you can gloss over with an apology?!”

I know, right?

For someone who knows this, why did you end it with an apology, you crazy teacher?

I continued to speak with a blank face,

“Still, since I didn’t say your name-“

“If reporters start snooping around, it won’t be long until they learn my name! You bastard, it doesn’t look like you can distinguish heaven and earth right now, but do you know what kind of mess you caused?!”

Of course I did.

“If this is leaked to the press…”

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, who was biting his lips, shouted,

“Who is the reporter you talked to?! Which newspaper is it?!”

Although he shouted with an angry voice and a forceful tone to pressure me, it was the wrong choice. The more aggressively he reacted, the cooler my head became.

I licked my dry lips.

Should I go a little further?

“But, to be honest, it is a fact that you said that to her.”

I grumbled in complaint. Teacher Shim Kyungtaek’s face was worth seeing.

I wanted to take a picture and send it to Lee Songha. I thought she’d like it.

“What, you bastard?”

Calling me ‘bastard, bastard’ for a while now.

For a professor to have such poor vocabulary. For a professor, who was formerly a musical actor, to fail to look through my sloppy acting and become purple with rage, his skills were also

doubtful.

“Everyone will know that Lee Songha is great at acting after the first broadcast, and I bet reporters will constantly ask me why we didn’t make her act earlier until my ears become sore. Those who don’t know will probably swear at the company. I only gave him the facts, thinking about the company’s situation-“

“The company’s situation?!”

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek finally shot up from his sofa.

“W&U will be in more of a mess if this is leaked to the press! Do you think this is some small incident?! If this incident is revealed, do you think it’ll end with just my name in disgrace?! I was asked-“

Why stop? You should have kept going.

You should have told me exactly what kind of mess it would create if it was revealed.

And whose face, other than yours, it would disgrace.

When I stared at him, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek spat a few more curses as if he said something unnecessary. It was too late even if he sealed his lips now. It had already been a while since my suspicion became a certainty. Now I only needed to pressure him and drag out the evidence.

A definite proof.

I suddenly recalled CEO Baek Hansung's figure.

His figure that could intimidate others by just looking at them without raising his voice or losing his temper. If CEO Baek Hansung was sitting here instead of me, what expression and what tone would he speak with?

"Your words seem to suggest that there is a hidden circumstance that can't be leaked to the press. It also seems like it's related to someone from W&U."

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek's voice shouted out immediately,

"Why are you pointlessly trying to learn things?! Tell me the name of that reporter and his company while we can resolve this before it gets bigger then leave! I'll talk to... the W&U team leader personally about the rest!"

"I don't know about that."

I relaxed my hunched shoulders and leisurely leaned my back against the sofa.

"Rather than a company problem I don't know, Lee Songha's problem is much more important to me."

“You bastard, you’re going too far! Why are you bringing up the past?!”

The past?

“It’s better for Lee Songha if we just gloss past this without digging further! She’s doing a project right now anyways! Everything’s good now, so why are you annoying me about this?!”

I clenched my fist.

If I was a more impulsive person, I might have already thrown a punch at him.

Director Park from twenty years in the future said that Lee Songha began acting past her thirties.

If I hadn’t seen that future and if, through overlapping fate, coincidences or whatever, Lee Songha didn’t begin acting, then she might have wasted ten years due to that ridiculous trauma.

The twenty-year-old Lee Songha I knew greatly enjoyed acting and put in endless effort into it to do better. How would those ten years look like for the Lee Songha I didn’t know? When I thought about that, I didn’t want to hear his bullshit any longer.

“As someone who is called a professor, you shouldn’t speak like

that.”

I quit trying to maintain my expression.

I stopped thinking about what I should say.

Everything progressed naturally.

Shim Kyungtaek was sitting awkwardly as he gazed at the youth in front of him.

He didn’t even remember his name. If that man didn’t create such a huge accident, he wouldn’t have even talked with him for this long.

Until now, he had thought he was a dimwit that flapped his tongue around reporters. If he sent him and the one he shared the secret with to W&U, they would eventually clean up the mess themselves, and he would never have to see this idiot again.

Although he had originally thought this, he felt something was strange when the youth’s expression changed.

The guy, who had kept rolling his vacant eyes, suddenly looked back at him as if he was someone who was very experienced in this industry.

“Why did you do that to Songha? For what reason? For whom?”

The slow-talking youth took out his phone. He played a video and placed it down in front of Shim Kyungtaek. The side of someone's face appeared on the small screen.

It was Lee Songha.

He could clearly hear the pages of the script flipping and the dialogue. It was a video taken during a script reading session.

"Wh-why are you show-"

Before he could finish his question, the youth smiled as he said,

"Isn't she good? When I first saw Lee Songha act, I thought all actors would be like that when I saw them up close, but that wasn't the case. The actors in the script reading session, the director and even a veteran actress with tens of years of experience. Everyone besides you said she was a natural."

Shim Kyungtaek couldn't take his eyes of Lee Songha's acting on the screen. It was like discovering a doll he had crushed so that it could never stand back up then thrown away had come back completely intact. It was difficult to endure the uncomfortable feeling.

A smooth yet cold voice burrowed into his ears.

“If I were you, I’d feel a little urgent. Even right now, the reporter is probably suspicious whether your abuse was intentional or not, and if this appears in the press, it will be impossible to deal with the aftermath. As you probably know, this…”

The youth’s lips curled upwards.

“Is a story reporters will go crazy for.”

“You, you…”

Shim Kyungtaek’s eyes reddened.

He was right. There would be nothing they could do if an article was published. He had experienced this industry long enough to know this. An article about Lee Songha would be like throwing fire at a dry stack of straws. It would burn up instantly, and they couldn’t even think about dealing with that aftermath.

Both himself and his student who asked him to.

As if he read his discomposure, the youth said in a persuading manner,

“That’s why, isn’t it better to tell me the problem the company doesn’t know and persuade me? If the article explodes, I’ll just remain as an ignorant manager who caused a mess, but for you, a professor, it seems it’ll leave quite the scar.”

“You bastard, are you threatenin-!”

“Threatening you?”

The youth laughed strangely.

“I never threatened anyone before.”

He then stopped laughing.

A heavy silence hung in the air. The youth stared at him and said,

“But I think I can.”

It was quicker than I thought.

I meant getting Teacher Shim Kyungtaek to say Son Chaeyoung’s name. Unexpectedly, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek didn’t seem to worry much about revealing Son Chaeyoung’s name. He was thinking more about how to silence the reporter.

Well, that wasn’t hard since there never was a reporter to silence.

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek was calling someone on his phone as he said,

“I told you before, it would have been better if you just glossed over it without knowing. You’ll see what I mean by that…”

I didn’t reply and left the school.

After having obtained what I wanted, I didn’t want to see his face any longer.

After walking a while, I leaned against a tree on the street. Then I checked the audio recording of Teacher Shim Kyungtaek’s words and sent it to Kim Hyunjo.

Since I received a call right away, I briefly explained the situation.

Son Chaeyoung suffered from stress after seeing Lee Songha act and requested Teacher Shim Kyungtaek to take action. Then Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, to protect his prized star student, cut the bud known as Lee Songha so that she wouldn’t grow anymore.

At first, I heard foul language coming from the phone, but around the middle, it became silent.

We decided to meet and discuss things with the team 3 leader and Lee Songha a bit later and hung up.

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and quickly entered the

fray of people. The early winter wind scratched past my face.

Did I only need to wait for the higher ups to come to a decision now?

I had reached my original goal. To expose the awkward suspicion I had. To catch Teacher Shim Kyungtaek and drag Son Chaeyoung's name out from him.

After slowly walking for a bit, I recalled what had happened.

I threatened someone, didn't I?

To be honest, I felt a bit weird. It wasn't because I threatened someone but because it didn't seem like much.

Instead, I didn't want to think about what might have happened next. I might have use fouler language than the ones he said to Lee Songha or even have asked Reporter Park Woojeong to expose Son Chaeyoung's selfish actions to the press.

That was if I was in a position like CEO Baek Hansung or myself twenty years in the future, who could take these actions, and not simply a manager.

On my way back to the company, I bought a tiramisu cake the size of a head to give to Lee Songha. I wanted to give her something delicious to eat before she learned of what kind of dirty, selfish exchange occurred behind the incidents causing her trauma.

If she learned of the truth, then she would more shocked and angrier than I was.

Though, knowing her, I wasn't sure if she would quietly bury it in her heart.

When I entered the meeting room, I saw Lee Songha, who had arrived ahead of me. It seemed she thought we were going to talk about her drama as she held the Cat Guardian Ghost script in her hands. Well, maybe not since she did bring that around with her wherever she went these days.

"You came?"

"Yeah. Eat this before the chief and team 3 leader arrive."

When I handed her the cake, her expression brightened. Although there wasn't much time before the appointed time, it was more than enough for Lee Songha to finish off this cake.

"Do I eat this all by myself?"

When I nodded my head, Lee Songha quickly unboxed the cake. Then she stared at the cake sprinkled with a fresh layer of cocoa powder. Some might think that she was appreciating at a work of art.

With one hand holding a cake knife and the other holding a fork, it looked like she was thinking about something before placing the knife down. Then she used the fork to dig into the center of the cake. A piece of the cake dangerously wavered on top of her fork.

It was the moment Lee Songha shoved the fork into her mouth with an expectant face.

The meeting room door abruptly opened, and two people entered in.

They weren't Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader we were waiting for but Son Chaeyoung and Chief Jo.

She didn't look like she came here to apologize.

Lee Songha, who was eating the cake, glanced at Son Chaeyoung before immediately getting in front of me. As if contemplating whether he should stop Son Chaeyoung or not, Chief Jo stood hesitantly before firmly closing the door in the end.

Son Chaeyoung asked in a tone that seemed like she would slap my cheek,

"What did you say to Teacher Shim? Who are you to threaten Teacher Shim?!"

Didn't they call this 'the crook accusing a law-abiding citizen of a crime'?

I was so dumbfounded that a laugh escaped my lips.

“You’re laughing?”

What happened next occurred in a few moments.

Son Chaeyoung swung her hand as if she was really trying to slap my cheek. While wondering whether she would actually go through with it, I leaned my head back to avoid it at the last instant. Lee Songha, who was more surprised than I was, threw her fork and stood up.

The usually calm Lee Songha’s eyes flared with rage.

Then, before I could stop her, of course, I didn’t want to either, she grabbed the cake with her bare hands and threw it at Son Chaeyoung’s face.

Chapter 57: A Person Who Found Something To Protect (8)

"…!"

Without being able to scream, Son Chaeyoung stiffened like a mannequin. Looking at how only her pupils slid downwards in her widened eyes, it seemed she couldn't grasp the situation and what had hit her face.

The tiramisu cake, still a black mess stuck onto her face, slowly slid down.

While taking in the once in a lifetime scene in front of me, I thought for a moment.

Although the cake I spent a lot of money on became like that, I didn't feel like the money was wasted.

The cake choice was great. If it was simply a cream cake, then I thought it would feel slightly lacking.

"Wh-what, th-this, Chae-Chaeyoung…"

Chief Jo's stutter broke the silence. He stared at me then at Lee Songha with the pale face of someone who had watched a terrifying horror movie before rummaging through his pockets and hurriedly disappearing, saying that he would bring tissues.

“… Are you crazy?”

Son Chaeyoung said as she wiped her cheek with the back of her hand and furiously brushed off the cakey mess. I thought she would rampage like a beast like before, but perhaps it was similar to the quiet before the storm as her voice was unexpectedly calm.

However, there was a vicious look in her eyes.

I raised my arm and shielded Lee Songha just in case.

“No,”

Replied Lee Songha.

When I turned around, I became surprised. Her voice was as calm as usual, but her eyes seemed to be burning. Her attitude seemed as though, if Son Chaeyoung raised her hand again, she’d throw the cake box at her too.

Well, she was like that. I had forgotten for a while.

I had forgotten that Lee Songha, who would become dejected whenever she troubled her team because of her mistakes, was the type who would say what she wanted and fight when necessary.

“You’re the one who started it.”

“You?”

The reason she reacts like this is because Lee Songha didn’t refer to her as her senior.

Son Chaeyoung laughed as if taken aback. Lee Songha didn’t care and continued,

“You tried to hit him.”

“So? Did he get hit? He dodged it like a slippery eel. Also, because I vented my anger on your manager, you throw a cake at your company senior? Have you lost your mind because people praise you for being a genius? Do you think that you can still-!”

“Don’t vent.”

Lee Songha cut her off.

“What?”

“Don’t vent your anger on someone else’s-“

Someone else’s?

“Someone else’s oppa.”

It felt like she had hurriedly changed her words.

However, I didn’t have the chance to be curious. Behind Son Chaeyoung, the door opened again. Then the still pale-faced Chief Jo glanced outside before entering then closing the door.

He had a bunch of tissues in one hand.

“Chaeyoung, before anyone sees you, you sho-“

“Oppa, is someone seeing me the problem? When I was hit with a cake?”

She spat after snatching the tissues. Chief Jo did a double take before looking at Lee Songha with a frown.

“What were you thi-!”

However, Chief Jo’s expression soon became bitter. It was clear he was also aware that Son Chaeyoung requested Teacher Shim Kyungtaek to block Lee Songha’s path. That was why he couldn’t scold her. When thinking of what Son Chaeyoung did, she deserved a rock thrown at her, let alone a cake.

Instead of Lee Songha, Chief Jo picked on me.

“Hey, you! How could you just watch instead of stopping her?!”

“I didn’t see it as I was thinking about Teacher Shim Kyungtaek.”

Chief Jo flinched like someone who had been suddenly attacked at my words. As if this sight irritated her, Son Chaeyoung angrily threw the tissues she was wiping her face with on the floor.

"Ah, I'm pissed. Don't think about picking on Teacher Shim with this incident. I heard that you now know everything. I did it. I asked the teacher to stop Lee Songha from acting."

"Chaeyoung!"

Frightened, Chief Jo checked outside.

I momentarily halted. Although Teacher Shim Kyungtaek told me everything, I never thought that Son Chaeyoung would admit it with her own mouth as if it was nothing.

I suddenly became worried and looked at Lee Songha. However, Lee Songha was less agitated than before. She simply stared at Son Chaeyoung with eyes that seemed calm and deep like a bottomless pool of water.

I couldn't tell what she was thinking with those eyes.

"But what are you going to do about it now that you know?"

Son Chaeyoung asked me.

“Who are you going to whine to? The director? The CEO? Try it. What do you think the CEO is going to say to me?”

“Chaeyoung, really, what if someone hears you?!”

When Chief Jo grabbed her arm and tried to stop her, Son Chaeyoung raised her voice.

“There’s no one besides these two anyways! And what did I do wrong?! I only hid it because it was embarrassing, do you think I hid it because I was scared?!”

“You. Haa, you clearly told the team leader you wouldn’t do it aga-!”

“I did it because I didn’t like her. When I thought that she might join my project, I became so irritated that I couldn’t read the script or sleep! I made so much money for the company, they can just gloss it over with that!”

Even her assigned manager, Chief Jo, seemed flabbergasted. Although he was looking at Son Chaeyoung like a moving bomb, Son Chaeyoung didn’t stop and continued,

“That’s why I became relaxed, oppa.”

“What?”

“Since there was nothing getting in my way, I became relaxed and didn’t get stressed. Because of that, the drama went well and so did the movie. I did so many commercials and advertisements last year too. Do you think that she’d make more than me even if she continued acting? In the company’s perspective, wasn’t this better?”

My anger surged, calmed, was taken aback, then calmed again.

There was one thing on my mind now.

Just where did someone like her come from?

It was like I was looking into Son Chayoung the human and not the actress. When you took off her clean, innocent fabricated façade, there was an obscure, disgusting monster inside.

“Can I tell you something?”

Without waiting for my reply, she said sarcastically,

“There not much time before I have to renew my contract. That is why the director and CEO aren’t going to say anything to me right now. From the drama releasing in January to extending commercial and advertising contracts, there’s a lot riding on me.”

Ah, so this was it. This was what Teacher Shim Kyungtaek meant.

That it would be better if I had just glossed over it without knowing.

“If the CEO asks me to apologize, then, well, I’ll think about it. So, until then, don’t piss someone off with something like this. It seems you don’t know because it hasn’t been long since you’ve started working, but this industry is always like this.”

I swallow the countless words that surged up my throat and said,

“Although it hasn’t been long since I’ve started working, there something I clearly learned.”

“Something you learned?”

Son Chaeyoung, who had a mocking smile, narrowed her eyes.

I looked at Lee Songha. She was still standing tall behind me.

However, I could feel her thin fingers clinging on my shirt.

Although I might not know the ways of the world, I wasn’t simply a naïve person. Meaning, I wasn’t the type to completely believe CEO Baek Hansung would make Son Chaeyoung pay a worthy price for her actions after listening to her words.

That wasn’t naivety but stupidity.

This industry was a breeding ground of absurdity and irrationality. There was nothing more to say about this as this was a celebrity management organization with an enormous food chain of boss-subordinate relationships.

Son Chaeyoung was a top actress residing in the upper echelon, while Lee Songha and I were buried way below, to the point where it would be difficult to see us, and were only now sticking our heads out and looking up towards the top.

However, because I was in this position, I could say this.

“You never know what will happen the very next day in this industry.”

Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader arrived long after the appointed time.

The team 3 leader’s expression stiffened after checking the cake on the meeting room floor and the cocoa powder still stuck on Son Chaeyoung’s neck. When the two of them entered, Son Chaeyoung clicked her tongue as if they were a hindrance.

Then she bobbed her head in greeting to the team 3 leader and left.

“Son Chaeyoung.”

When the team 3 leader called out to her, Son Chaeyoung momentarily stopped.

“This isn’t something we can just gloss over.”

“It’s tiresome to say the same thing multiple times. Please talk with my team leader.”

She said with a smile before disappearing without turning back. Chief Jo followed behind while reading at the team 3 leader’s expression.

Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader shook their heads. They both revealed the same expression I had on previously. An expression that said, ‘Just where did someone like her come from?’

I, once again, thought that the influence of a top star was quite amazing and that, if I didn’t want to see such dirty figures in this industry, I needed to at least have the title of a CEO.

“How ill-mannered. She’s no good.”

The team 3 leader sat in an empty seat and said,

“It looks like Shim Kyungtaek, that damn bastard, called the team 2 leader. He fumed about how you crossed the line or whatever so we were late because we got in a dispute.”

“He looked like he was going to grind you up.”

Kim Hyunjo added with a frown.

Since I already became an eyesore to the team 2 leader after the Sung Dowon incident, with this, it seemed that I had crossed a point of no return. Well, I had no thoughts on turning things around for this incident.

The team 3 leader tapped my arm.

“You have nothing to worry about. I firmly told the team 2 leader that I told you to do it and to not even think about letting his temper out on you.”

“Ah, yes.”

“How dare he try to vent his anger out on someone else after being stabbed in the back? He should have taken better care of his people. If it were me, I would be too embarrassed to show my face.”

When the team 3 leader continued to grumble, Kim Hyunjo tapped the table and changed the subject.

“While both hyung and I have listened to the audio file, tell us from the start.”

Still aware of Lee Songha, who was sitting next to me, I opened my mouth.

From the incident with Shim Kyungtaek in the morning, to the incident just now. As I told the events which took place while taking out the unnecessary bits and emphasizing others, Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader's expressions progressively turned uglier. The only one who remained calm was Lee Songha, the person this concerned.

No, at this point, she surpassed calmness and approached the boundaries of imperturbability.

On the other hand, the two who showed intense reactions at each word, using swears I hadn't even heard of before, became rampant like angry bulls when they heard the part when Son Chaeyoung mentioned the director and the CEO.

"There's a limit to wickedness. At this point, she's just a crazy bitch."

"Songha, you should have thrown the table at her instead of the cake,"

Added Kim Hyunjo. I deeply agreed with him.

"Hyung, how much longer is it until Son Chaeyoung's contract renewal?"

“I don’t know the exact date, but since they made a 2-year exclusive contract last time, there isn’t much time left. That’s why the team 2 leader was busy since last month, trying to curry favor with Son Chaeyoung. Even Team Leader Park from the PR team was exhausted.”

“Don’t tell me the director and the CEO will really…”

Kim Hyunjo said while glancing at Lee Songha. He was worried that the director and the CEO would really gloss over this for the contract renewal like Son Chaeyoung said.

The team 3 leader frowned.

“This isn’t a 1-person company for Son Chaeyoung, she needs to take responsibility for her actions. This goes the same for that Shim Kyungtaek bastard. When I investigated, it looked like there were previous cases before Songha as well. I’ll call the director and the CEO and discuss it with them.”

The two talked for a while before each saying a word of encouragement to Lee Songha and getting up. Since they left with murderous looks, it looked like their target was either Chief Jo or the team 2 leader.

I was also about to leave, but I kept thinking of the disaster in the meeting room.

I rolled up my sleeves and wiped the cake plastered everywhere.

Lee Songha, who was next to me, helping me clean up with tissues, said,

"Sorry."

"About what?"

"I threw the cake you bought me."

Then she looked at the cake dropped under the table as if it was a waste.

Although she knew her life had almost been twisted by Son Chaeyoung's wickedness, the words she said with a serious expression were... I wanted to open her head and see what kind of thoughts were contained in that small head of hers. It was this moment when I felt it was a pity my ability wasn't mind reading.

"I was only able to take one bite, but it was incredibly tasty. It was expensive, right?"

"No, you did well to throw it."

The price didn't matter.

"It's all good since it was worthwhile."

I grinned when I recalled Son Chaeyoung's face plastered with cake. It seemed Lee Songha recalled the same thing as her lips curved slightly upwards.

"Don't think it was a waste. I'll buy you one that's bigger."

"Yes."

As she picked up the tissues and placed them in the cake box, she said in a passing tone,

"That witch."

"Huh?"

"If I work hard and become successful, can I drive her out far away?"

Even after I took Lee Songha to her residence and went home, her last words kept ringing in my ears.

Her words asking if she could drive Son Chaeyoung far away.

Although she said it in a passing tone, the more I thought about it, the heavier her words felt.

While I was thinking about it, slouched on my desk, my phone

rang.

It was a number I was seeing for the first time.

Well, it seemed by phone number became public since broadcast writers and entertainment reporters would call me all day and night so I was used unknown numbers now.

“Yes, this is Jung Sunwoo.”

-Umm. Are you free to talk?

Whoa.

I hurriedly turned the phone, which was against my ear, and confirmed the phone number.

Did I ever see this number on my company’s list of phone numbers?

He sounded like CEO Baek Hansung.

“Umm, are you the CEO…”

-Right. I called you because I wanted to ask you something.

I heard a low laughter from the other side.

That moment, I suddenly recalled what CEO Baek Hansung said to me privately in his office.

What to give me if the drama is a success.

If there was something I wanted, to tell him then.

I straightened my back and said while sitting,

“I’m free to talk. I also… have something I would like to tell you.”

Chapter 58: Begin Filming (1)

-Tell me.

CEO said without hesitation.

Although the thought that I should talk with Kim Hyunjo or the team 3 leader first briefly crossed my mind, I had already set my mind.

I never knew CEO Baek Hansung would personally call me.

Let's act first and report later. If I talk to Kim Hyunjo tomorrow. Hmm. I guess I'd get the same look I've received a few times.

The 'he's crazy' look.

I relaxed and calmed myself down with my mother's ginger honey tea before saying,

"About what you said last time. If Cat Guardian Ghost is a success, to tell you then..."

-Ah.

A low laugh.

Was it because he was the CEO? Why couldn't I even listen to his laughter comfortably?

-It looks like you found something you wanted?

As carefully as possible, I talked about Son Chaeyoung, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, and Lee Songha. It seemed he had already heard this from the team 3 leader as he also seemed to know the whole story.

While I was seriously setting things up for my final words, CEO Baek Hansung indicated he was listening with short replies.

After I expressed everything I could, I said,

"Rather than a spoken apology... I'd like if she paid the appropriate price."

-How odd.

"Pardon?"

The voice from the other end continued.

-When I listen to you talk, it feels like you are certain the drama will do well.

“Th-that’s because it’s a good drama. I believe that it will definitely be a success.”

Good. That seemed natural.

-Okay. Then try making it a success. I’ll think about the price.

I clenched my fist.

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek’s overbearing face and Son Chaeyoung’s mocking face appeared in front of me. I thought I’d have trouble sleeping after seeing those two poor excuses for human beings today, but my mind became calm at last.

Then I suddenly recalled CEO Baek Hansung’s motive for calling me.

“What you wanted to ask me was…”

Just what did he have to ask me?

While spinning my head and thinking of different circumstances, I heard a relaxed voice.

-That drama. How do you think it’ll do in China?

“Pardon?”

-I’m asking a lucky person to guess.

*

Beijing, China.

In the living room of the glamorous suite room lavished in red, CEO Baek Hansung, who was leaning against a spacious sofa, said a few more words before hanging up. He tossed his phone to the side of the sofa and threw his head back.

“CEO, we need to go down in twenty minutes.”

The director entered the living room and sat on the sofa. His exhaustion due to the busy schedule was clearly evident on his face. Although they were on the same schedule, he looked twice as exhausted as CEO Baek Hansung.

“But who did you call for so long? Was it the team 3 leader again?”

CEO Baek Hansung, who was lost in thought with his eyes closed, curled his lips into a smile.

“No, Jung Sunwoo.”

“Who? Jung Sunwoo… Jung Sun-The team 3 Luck Tosser?”

When the director became puzzled, CEO Baek Hansung's smile grew even more apparent.

"There was something I wanted to ask him."

"Just what did you have to ask him... Ah, the problem regarding Chaeyoung and Songha?"

"There's that too. I asked him to guess what the reaction of Cat Guardian Ghost would be in China."

Taken aback, the director said exasperatingly,

"... He's not some sort of shaman. At this rate, we might have to pay him a commission."

While sitting on the sofa and looking through the thick folder he had brought, the director asked,

"So what did he say."

CEO Baek Hansung paused for a moment. As if out of habit, his white, long finger tapped on the sofa.

"He said he thinks it'll be good."

“Oh, I wish it does. But, while it’s true that his ability is extraordinary at times, I don’t know about his senses. The reason why he rejected Dowon when he asked him to be his manager, it seemed that he later said he got a bad vibe.”

“… Really?”

His finger stopped in midair.

CEO Baek Hansung straightened his relaxed posture. He brushed back his tangled hair and narrowed his eyes. His eyes shined as if he found a good source of entertainment.

“He said he got a bad vibe from Sung Dowon?”

“Well, it was probably a joke.”

“Quite odd…”

Then the director said to the quietly mumbling CEO,

“Ah, there’s one more. I heard this from the PR team. Well, they told me this was also said as a joke.”

“Hmm?”

“Mermaid out of Water, he said he got a bad vibe about that too.”

This time, CEO Baek Hansung tilted his head.

“Now that’s unexpected.”

“That’s why I’m not sure about his senses. It might just be his habit.”

The director changed the subject.

“But, did Luck Tosser say anything about the problem regarding Son Chaeyoung?”

“Ah. We decided to talk about it again in January.”

“January? Why…”

“The two dramas start broadcasting that time.”

CEO Baek Hansung’s tone was mixed with interest and an odd feeling.

“What does that have to do with…”

The director cut his words short when he saw the CEO lost in thought.

After around 10 minutes had passed, CEO Baek Hansung stretched as his muscles inside his thin shirt showed their vigor. After ridding himself of exhaustion, he stretched out his hand.

“The portfolios?”

“Ah, I did prepare them as you told me to.”

The director took out a few portfolios from the folder he was holding.

“Everyone else’s image isn’t really good enough to replace Dowon… The advertisers want a high-class, refined image. Jijoon is the closest to what they are looking for, but he’s not well-known in China.”

CEO Baek Hansung received the portfolios and wordlessly flipped through them. The director scratched his half-balding head and asked in a quiet voice, even though they were the only two there,

“But… Why are you trying to replace Dowon? The advertisers chose Dowon, and since they’ve clearly experienced the effects of marketing with a star, they will try not to let him go.”

CEO Baek Hansung stared at Sung Dowon’s portfolio in his hand. Sung Dowon’s profile picture was of him, barefooted in a white dress shirt, lying down on a sandy beach with a smile. It was the cool, elegant smile that made him a popular Hallyu star.

Hallyu – a term to indicate Korean entertainment and music

spreading overseas.

“We need to clean up the uncontrollable bomb.”

CEO Baek Hansung closed the portfolio and tossed it below the sofa.

Looking at this, the director subtly licked his lips and said,

“What about Chaeyoung? Apparently, the advertisers had wanted to keep Dowon and replace Chaeyoung with a new face, but they stopped once Mermaid out of Water received heated reactions in China.”

“Really?”

“Although Korea is in a frenzy about Cat Guardian Ghost, the reactions for Mermaid out of Water is pretty good here. Well, since it’s to the point where the copyrights for this unreleased drama sold for $1.7 million.”

After rubbing his chin multiple times, CEO Baek Hansung placed Seo Jijoon’s portfolio on the table. Then pushed Son Chaeyoung’s portfolio, which was next to it, aside and replaced it with a thin, paltry portfolio.

It was Lee Songha.

“How does this look?”

“Uh, umm… They look good. They look good, but I don’t think the advertisers will like it.”

The director, who had replied hesitantly, scratched the hair behind his ear.

“Not many people know Jijoon here, but Songha is completely unknown. Maybe if, like Luck Tosser said, the drama is a big hit in China, but that’s something decided by heavens. Would it really be that lucky?”

“We have to see. Did you say that contracts of the Cat Guardian Ghost copyrights are still ongoing?”

“It looks like Pan Production is trying their best, but it seems the contract needs more adjustments. It looks like they are in a bit of a mess because it hasn’t been long since the production itself was founded, and above all, they don’t have a Hallyu star to push. Maybe I should have talked to Blackout since playing around after their concert.”

The director mumbled while licking his lips.

CEO Baek Hansung checked his watch and leisurely wore his necktie.

Soon, he opened his mouth.

“Find out the CEO of Pan Production’s number.”

“Pardon?”

“Also, tell him to get meetings with a few big online video platforms here.”

The director let out a silent sigh as he expected that, listening to the CEO’s words, they would have to push back their return date. Unlike the director’s round, slumped shoulders, CEO Baek Hansung’s lips curved upwards as he gazed at the three portfolios on the table.

“… I’m curious about this as well.”

“What?”

“How much of Jung Sunwoo’s vibes are correct.”

*

It felt like I was speeding on the Autobahn in a sports car.

Each day passed by at lightning speed. Although I had never gone to the autobahn or ridden in a sports car, I just thought it would feel like this.

Extremely fast.

In a blink of an eye, we had another filming of Next K-Star and two more episodes of it had been broadcast. The highest viewership rating was 3.1% on the first broadcast, 3.6% on the second, and 3.9% on the third. It kept reaching a new highest viewership rating every broadcast and continued to go up.

Maybe it was because we were close to hitting 4%, but the staff's smiles were reaching their ears.

Although Producer Go Joontae still put Neptune, especially focusing on Lee Songha, through various edits and milked Lee Songha's trendiness, he didn't directly screw them over again like the first broadcast. Of course, since we didn't know when he would screw us over again, we had to keep our eyes open.

Either way, since their faces kept showing up on screen, they were becoming more and more well-known, and since they continuously received good scores from the judges, they were gradually building the image of a talented girl group.

Broadcasts were indeed great as, once their name became a little known, they started to receive more event requests and increased pay, and they now made enough to at least pay their makeup expenses. This was worth clapping for.

"We're almost done."

Accompanied by the cold night air, the traitor entered the open hall.

“Did you smoke?”

“Does it smell?”

“Of course it does. You didn’t smoke before, right?”

“I quit… But I started craving it recently.”

The traitor clicked his tongue as he shook his clothes. Maybe it was because of the cigarette, but his face, which looked as exhausted as Kim Hyunjo’s, seemed to have found some of its vigor.

Due to my family environment, I never touched a cigarette during school or even mandatory military service, but I’ve become tempted recently. Other team managers would look livelier after a smoke during filming as if they had an IV injection.

“Today’s Songha’s first drama filming, right?”

“Yeah. Finally.”

After finishing the photo shoot for the poster and Gosa, Cat Guardian Ghost began filming not too long ago. They were busy filming the flashback scenes of the male and female leads before

snow started to fall. Although it was Songha's first filming today, I heard that Seo Jijoon and Chief Lee Bongjoon were already spending their days going back and forth between the outdoor and indoor film sets.

A ritual to avoid misfortune and bring good luck.

"Are you going to the set right after this recording?"

"Yeah. They said we need to be on standby by 4 a.m."

It currently just past midnight right now. We needed to dash to the film set after erasing her performance makeup, putting on new makeup, and changing her outfit. While I was looking at my watch and estimating the time, the traitor let out a small sigh and said,

"Then you probably won't be able to come to work tomorrow. I'll text you the details of the meeting."

"There was a meeting?"

"We're starting meetings discussing the girls' next mini album."

Ah, right. We were.

There were countless celebrities who faded into obscurity after the programs, that made them well-known, ended. To prevent this from happening to Neptune, we were carefully considering our next step.

The most important thing was Neptune's next mini album, which would be released early next year.

This was because, while we are focusing on entertainment shows and dramas, Neptune was a girl group. If they even had one hit song the general public knew the melody of, their activities could greatly expand to performances, events, autograph events, as well as others.

Because their future would be well set if this album was a success, all related employees were mobilized and were putting their heart and soul into it. Since there weren't only one or two albums with Neptune's name on it that failed, it felt like they were all grounding their teeth in determination.

Kim Hyunjo had pretty much become a roaming zombie, yet full of drive, trying to prevent Neptune from quickly falling from the music charts this time.

The only person who felt more expectant than pressured or worried was probably me.

Since I knew that there was a very likely chance that Neptune's next title track would reach first on the music charts.

"Hey, Lee Songha. Good luck with filming!"

Said Im Seoyoung as she rubbed her tired eyes in front of their residence. Lee Taehee and LJ held their yawns back as they added

their own words of encouragement.

“Songha, good luck. Don’t be pressured since it’s your first filming.”

“Do they give you breakfast there? I set aside some snacks in the back seat so if you’re hungry, of course, you will be, you can eat it all.”

Lee Songha was the only one left in the car as she nodded her head in front of the window. Of course, she showed the greatest reaction to LJ’s words.

I was about to start the car when Im Seoyoung said some gloomy words from outside.

“You have to do better than Son Chaeyoung! Son Chae-!”

“Don’t give her pressure, dummy!”

The back mirror reflected Im Seoyoung getting hit in the back of her head by LJ.

Kim Hyunjo and I tidied up Son Chaeyoung and Teacher Shim Kyungtaek’s atrocities before telling the girls, but wow, their reactions were killer. Either way, Son Chaeyoung became their mutual enemy at their residence.

Lee Taehee was silently angry, while LJ threw an uppercut to Im Seoyoung's cat doll and ripped its leg. Im Seoyoung printed out a humiliating photo of Son Chaeyoung, placed in an easily viewable spot in the living room, and made time to appreciate it every day.

I heard that the company would have a New Year's party at the beginning of the year. I couldn't imagine what would happen when they met Son Chaeyoung there.

Well, since we weren't sure, I jokingly talked with Kim Hyunjo about it.

Asking whether we should prepare a few cakes at our table.

We visited the shop, finished our preparations for the shoot, and immediately drove to the outdoor film site next to Han River. Lee Songha, who was sitting in the back seat, was eating the snacks prepared by LJ as if they were military provisions as she flipped through her script.

Looking at her expression, it seemed she had partially gotten into the role of Jung Haewon already.

I shouldn't bother her.

Although it was very late, there were almost a hundred people crowding the filming set on Han riverbank. I slowly approached before opening the car window and sticking my head out. I was faced with the wet, howling wind along with the loud noises on

set.

There was a long crane, lighting equipment, cameras, thick cables, and people going around holding reflectors. I was seeing the busy filming site I had only seen in behind-the-scenes videos with my own two eyes.

I felt adrenaline surging within me. I probably had the same face the quadruplets would have when they arrived at an amusement park.

When I parked the car between other vans, a familiar assistant director knocked on the window.

“You’ve come?”

“Yes, you’re working hard when it’s so late.”

“This is nothing since we’re only starting. Nothing.”

The assistant director gestured to the film site with his chin and said worriedly,

“The staff who didn’t get to see the script reading session as well as extras. They are all talking a ton about Lee Songha. Since this is Han River, there will be a big crowd of people when the day brightens... The director was worried Lee Songha would feel pressured. Will she be okay?”

I turned to my back.

Lee Songha was staring at the cover of the script. No. I couldn't really tell whether she was looking at the cover or if the cover just happened to be where she was staring at. Beside her were leftover snacks she hadn't finished yet.

I nodded my head to the assistant director.

"I think it'll be fine."

"Yes, then..."

The assistant director shouted into the intercom on the headset around his neck.

"Lee Songha has arrived!"

Then he briefly placed his ear next to the headset before looking in my direction.

"Yes, Lee Songha will do a rehearsal first..."

Then said his final words.

"Then immediately begin filming!"

Chapter 59: Begin Filming (2)

“I heard people are filming a drama over there? Apparently, Seo Jijoon’s there, Seo Jijoon!”

“Who? Who’s there?”

“Seo Jijoon and what’s her name. That girl with the acting controversy. Ah, Lee Songha!”

“Should we go take a look?”

Late morning. One by one, the people who had been walking down the cherry blossom path, which only bare branches remaining, made their way to the Han riverbank. There were already quite a few people spectating the film set. Around half were female fans who came for Seo Jijoon, while the others were interested to see Lee Songha, who was a hot topic due to her acting controversy.

A woman stuck her head out from the crowd.

In her case, she was the former. As soon as she heard that Seo Jijoon had appeared at Han River, she made an excuse, saying that she had to go to the bank, and left work. Although Lee Songha’s acting skills might have been of great interest to others, she felt that she already didn’t even have enough time to only see Seo Jijoon.

With wide open eyes, she was thinking about seeing him a little more.

While she did think this, she tilted her head and thought,

‘What’s wrong with me?’

As if entranced, her gaze kept going elsewhere.

It wasn’t to Seo Jijoon but Lee Songha.

Although she didn’t know what they were filming, she knew that Lee Songha was imitating a cat. And that she was great at it. Every minor gesture and movement made her look like she truly was possessed by a cat.

Even though the person in front of her was human, as if they were an illusion, she felt like she could see the perked ears and tail of a cat.

‘I have to take a picture.’

The woman filled the photo gallery on her phone with pictures of Lee Songha instead of Seo Jijoon.

Next to her, a man holding a bicycle under his arm continuously admired,

“There was such a fuss on the internet, but she’s good at acting?”

“Eeyah, if she messed up, it would be such a toe-curling scene, but she does it so well and naturally. It’s like she’s really a cat. I wish my cat at home could change like that. Then I would serve her as my master.”

“Don’t think about that, you crazy bastard.”

“Her acting aside, how could someone look like that?”

“I know, right? Are all actresses like her? It’s like she was made through computer graphics.”

The majority of reactions about Lee Songha was positive. Someone made a big fuss, saying that they knew she’d be good, mentioning Jang Yoonok’s interview, while others felt embarrassed, saying that this was unexpected as they had been 100% sure she was an add-on.

Among them, a man who had been absentmindedly staring at Lee Songha mumbled,

“Should I make a post about her on social media? Lee Songha is still being criticized a lot.”

Although the heated criticisms came to a lull after Jang Yoonok’s interview, there were still many who ignored it and continued to condemn her. There were even people saying that Jang Yoonok did

the interview for the drama.

“Yeah, post it, post it.”

When his friend egged him on, the man uploaded a post on his social media.

-I am currently watching them film Lee Songha’s drama, and it’s true she’s good at acting. To those who are commenting that she’s terrible at acting without any proof, let’s stop now. End of controversy!

-Who are you to say ‘end of controversy’? Are you being paid?

When he saw the reply, the man frowned.

-Who are you to talk so impolitely when we’ve never met before? I’m watching her act right now.

-Then why don’t you upload a video?

“Now, really.”

The man rolled up his sleeves and recorded Lee Songha acting. Just when he thought they would believe him now, comments began to stream below it. While there were people who saw this positively, the comments saying ‘Shit Eyes Confirmed’ were more eye-catching.

“The hell? Why are they like this? They are seeing it for themselves, but they don’t believe it.”

“They are just saying they didn’t see her with their own eyes.”

The man fought with the faceless commenters on the internet before raising the flag. There were so many people diligently writing hateful comments that he couldn’t face them by himself. Astonished, he screenshotted the hate comments.

“Why are you screenshotting them?”

“If this drama airs, then the comments about the controversy about Lee Songha’s acting skills will die down, right?”

“Probably?”

“I want to use this as evidence then.”

*

The shoot that started early morning didn’t end even though the sun was leaning towards the west. All we did was move locations from Han River to an outdoor film set.

Whether she was in front of the camera or not, Lee Songha went around as if she was possessed by Jung Haewon. I let her be

because I had heard that she could become more immersed in her role and that it would show up better on the camera this way, but there was a big problem.

She didn't eat.

Lee Songha didn't eat.

Because of the Next K-Star recording, she hadn't been able to eat much yesterday, and all she ate at night were the snacks LJ had left her. Even when the staff brought her a lunchbox, which I could tell was high-quality at a glance, she barely ate it.

Oh, my god. For there to be 'barely eating' in her vocabulary.

While I was wondering what I should do, a truck arrived at the film set.

"Please take care of Jijoon oppa! Cat Guardian Ghost, fighting!"

Ah, now that I think about it, they said Seo Jijoon's fans were coming today.

When I checked, it was a food truck emitting a delicious scent. There was a menu on its banner, and it was pretty much a gift set. For Lee Songha.

I dragged the still absentminded Lee Songha in front of the food

truck.

“Songha, look at that. Fish cakes, tteok-bokki, chicken skewers, shrimp tempura…”

“Pardon?”

Sure enough, Jung Haewon disappeared and along came Lee Songha. The food truck opened like a ‘Transformer’, and as soon as the plentiful food inside was revealed, Lee Songha’s eyes twinkled like a child who was seeing an amazing toy.

“I want it. I wish I could take it home.”

“You can’t so give up.”

It looked like she planned on putting it her stomach to make up for being unable to take it home as Lee Songha piled food on her plate to form a mountain. She really piled it up into a mountain. The staff became wide-eyed at the sight as they stared at her.

Well, this made sense since the Lee Songha they had seen since she had gotten into character early this morning was the cold, mature Jung Haewon.

As if they thought this was a good scene, the behind-the-scenes team came over and filmed it.

“Wow, how unexpected. She eats all that? Where does it all go?”

“Why are you saying that to a person who has been working hard since early morning. Eat up!”

When she was Jung Haewon, the staff only glanced at her from afar with an expression that seemed to show they were holding back their words, however, they were currently approaching her and saying something to her before leaving.

We went around the film set and told the other actors and staff, including Director Shin Taekyun, to eat well.

Just when we sat down and raised our chopsticks,

“Luck Tosser and Songha, you guys should eat a lo… Oh, you already are. Did you ransack the food truck?”

Chief Lee Bongjoon, who brought a crowd of Seo Jijoon’s fans behind him, showed a dumbfounded expression when he saw Lee Songha’s plate.

“Songha didn’t eat much since yesterday.”

Of course, she would eat this much even if she did. Either way, I turned to Seo Jijoon’s fans after making that excuse. There were women who seemed to be around my age as well as girls with no makeup, who seemed to have just graduated school.

“Thank you for the meal.”

When I said this, Lee Songha bowed her head with a shrimp tempura in her mouth,

“It’s really good. Thank you for the meal.”

“Ah… Eat a lot, unni!”

The fans, who had been blankly looking at Lee Songha, waved. Just now, there were a few who were giving her a sharp look, but, perhaps due to a preconception, their gazes softened the moment they received Lee Songha’s greeting. After they took a few pictures of Lee Songha eating, the fans handed me a paper bag.

“Please take this. And please take care of Seo Jijoon oppa from now on.”

“Ah, yes. Please take care of me as well.”

The bag was filled with items that were useful on a winter film set. There were hot packs, hand cream, candy, and even a lap blanket. Seo Jijoon’s name and the name of his fan club were engraved on the corner of the blanket.

Although I was well aware of the support and present-giving culture of celebrity fans, after experiencing it firsthand, they were

extremely devoted.

Did I have to hand something out with Lee Songha's name on it as well?

"But, aren't you guys going overboard? The drama hasn't even been broadcasted, yet you already supplied a food truck and presents. It must have cost a lot, right?"

At Chief Lee Bongjoon's words, the woman who looked to be the oldest of the bunch replied friendlily,

"Since the situation is what it is, we prepared it early to cheer you up. And the moment we opened up the bank account, the 'ammunition' gathered in an instant. We became more tightly knit after the controversy broke out and people kept bothering us from all around."

"That's right. Since we all fought like hell these days, everyone's fighting skill is at their max."

"We collected a bunch of hate comments, and we'll send it over to the PR team."

Looking at this, I became a little jealous.

For there to be fans who would roll up their sleeves and help out this much.

“Yeah. I’ll try to set up a small fan meeting if the drama is a hit.”

“Once the broadcast starts, there will be a flow of ‘light’ fans, so we’ll bring a food truck and coffee truck then.”

“Although we’re thankful, don’t push yourselves too hard.”

Soon, Seo Jijoon, who had finished talking with the director, walked this way. His fans gathered around him. His fans, who said they had fought against the haters, were jumping up and down with flushed faces.

It was rather Seo Jijoon who spread his arms out and met with no hesitation. He lightly hugged them, held their hands, and it looked like he knew a few of their faces as he even called them their names. The fans who were called by their names looked like their faces would burst.

Seo Jijoon’s great at fan service.

His youngest-looking fan babbled,

“There is a poll about which drama broadcasting early next year people are waiting for, and Cat Guardian Ghost is second right now, oppa! We posted it a lot on social media and gathered a ton of votes!”

“We’re second? Who’s first?”

At his question, the fans showed a sad expression.

“Mermaid out of Water. The firepower of the fans of the original work is so strong!”

“We fought hard, but we were crushed, oppa.”

I didn’t know where the poll was going on, but I decided to vote as well.

“You must be tired because of all the fuss on the internet.”

When his fans looked at him with sympathetic eyes, Seo Jijoon clicked his tongue. Then he looked at Lee Songha as he said,

“She’s the one who should be tired. There are still a lot of people who think she was cast as a set with me when, in fact, it was me who joined after she was already cast. You should watch her act and spread the word around.”

“Yes!”

His fans nodded their heads incessantly.

After the short meal time, the filming commenced right away.

Lee Songha, once again, got into character and was waiting. I was watching her when I kept hearing Lee Songha's name from somewhere.

When I looked around, I saw Seo Jijoon's fans gathered in a circle, looking at something.

"Wow. So much nonsense. Do they really have nothing to do?"

"This person looks like he has a grudge on Lee Songha."

When I took a few steps closer and looked, it seemed one of them had uploaded a picture of Lee Songha eating online. When I took out my phone and checked, it was a picture of her eating. I was also caught on camera as the person sitting in front of her.

The picture was fine, but the comments below it were quite the sight.

-Wow, did she go to the film set to eat? She's just stuffing herself instead of practicing.

-A genius doesn't need to do such things like practice.

"These crazy..."

I intentionally spoke my mind. The fans, who had been looking at their phones, became surprised and looked at me.

“Ah, sorry. I lost control for a second.”

When I explained while showing them the page on my phone, a girl with a ponytail consoled me.

“Ah, you saw it. There are a lot of crazies on the internet.”

“Since it’s a battle of fandoms as celebrities, it’s not this bad when you have a big fandom.”

“That’s right. Although there are a lot of people protecting her, it’s more like commenting in the passing. There aren’t a lot of fans who are grabbing the haters by their collars and talking back, saying, ‘You’re dead.’ That’s why haters will start to gather.”

When a few of them opened their mouths, a few more voices joined in.

“But does Neptune have no fandom? They’ve recently been getting popular.”

“Although they have been gaining popularity because of Next K-Star, their solidarity is weak. There are apparently Neptune fans who don’t think well of Lee Songha. If this continues and a fight between group fans and individual fans break out, it’ll be hell.”

Neptune fans don’t think well of Lee Songha?

I had been happy thinking that they were gaining fans as Neptune's ranking in the Next K-Star viewer polls was slowly rising.

"Is that true?"

When I asked seriously, a short-haired woman flinched as she replied,

"I heard a bit about it since I fangirl over another girl group on the side. They seemed to think Lee Songha is the only one who's not trying?"

"But it makes sense that they think that."

Other fans carefully added in,

"I saw all the episodes of Next K-Star out right now, and maybe it's because she gets pointed out a lot more than other members, but I did think that she wasn't trying hard and glossing over things."

"Why, you see it occasionally in other groups. Members who don't care about team activities and are only concerned about their personal schedules. She might be branded as someone like them."

To call her a member who is only concerned about her own

personal schedule and passingly does team activities. It was vastly different from the real Lee Songha. When I thought that there could be many people looking at her with that opinion, I became so frustrated I was about to suffocate.

On the other hand, I also thought that it was possible that those who only saw her through the TV could think that.

Next K-Star was a program with 60-minute episodes, and there were dozens of celebrities appearing on it. Although Lee Songha had more on-screen time compared to others, they only made up a fraction of the episode. There was no way they could tell what kind of person Lee Songha was and how hard she tried with just that.

“How frustrating. She’s practicing for her performances just as much as acting.”

When I mumbled while clicking my tongue, the fans said,

“But it’s not noticeable.”

“Since we don’t know her circumstances, we’re just spouting nonsense, taking the bait.”

“To be honest, if we had decent bait, we could get the fandom to unite. Right?”

“Bait?”

The girl with the ponytail replied,

“A video or a gif, something like that. Something that could show ‘she’s a hard-worker’.”

A bait that could show Lee Songha was a hard-worker, huh?

“I did record her practicing in the practice room a lot.”

“That seems too much like a setup. If the company is involved, then it looks like they are trying to brainwash the public and will probably make things worse than not doing anything.”

“Have people uploaded any fan cams?”

They proactively began tapping their phones.

“Not much. Are there any broadcasts where all the members appeared on together?”

I looked back at my memories.

“They appeared on a music broadcast on Knet, a public network music broadcast, Next K-Star, and they had a live broadcast on TBS’s sharing campaign… Ah, they didn’t appear on that.”

When I thought back to that day, I reflexively frowned.

The day of the sudden downpour.

The day Lee Songha had been dancing on the wet stage before she fell and later recorded Next K-Star with an injured ankle. What was worse was that they only did a rehearsal, they didn't get to show their faces on the live broadcast. Even when I thought about it again, it was ridiculous.

"Uh."

A girl who had her face pressed against her phone tilted her head. Then she showed me her screen.

"Is it this?"

When I looked at the screen, it was the personal blog of a public officer.

It seemed he was someone who participated in TBS's sharing campaign as he had uploaded a brief post of what occurred that day and some pictures.

There was also a video as well.

The title was 'The girl group Webtoon who suffered in the rain'.

Webtoon?

As soon as the video began to play, I heard heavily pouring rain. Then I saw the girls dancing on the stage. Their figures, which had become completely soaked in less than a minute, was clearly reflected in the high-resolution video.

“What the hell? Why is the stage like that? There could be an accident.”

When someone mumbled this, the Lee Songha on screen staggered and fell. Two or three people sucked in their breaths. Lee Songha got right back up within a few seconds like a roly-poly toy before quickly resuming her dance.

The screen turned black once the video ended.

The fans who had been staring at the screen, one by one, raised their heads and looked at me.

The girl with the ponytail said,

“We found the bait.”

Chapter 60: Begin Filming (3)

{Video} Who has seen the fan cam of Neptune performing in the rain?

They say it was a live broadcast of a campaign from PBS, but as they rehearsed in the rain, Lee Songha fell really hard at 2:24. However, she got up in 2 seconds and continued. There were people who disdained her, saying she was participating in their team activities half-heartedly even thought she was a rookie, but when looking at this, she doesn't look like someone who would do that.

-Oh, my god. It hurts just watching.

-If it looks like this on screen, then it must have a huge downpour.

-I read the comments of the person who took the fan cam, and it said that they only did the rehearsal and didn't even get to appear on the broadcast due to the weather. So sad. T^T

-I heard from somewhere that this was the day of the first Next K-Star recording. There were tons of people who were bashing her after watching the first broadcast, saying her expression looked sour or that she didn't look like she worked hard, but to be honest, there's no way your condition wouldn't be good if you went to a recording after that.

-But when I keep replaying the video, she glances at her ankle at

around 2:34 after she gets up. Maybe she got a sprain?

-Huh? You're right.

-I'm honestly shocked by all the controversies about her attitude and personality. My friend saw Lee Songha in front of W&U before, and she said she was very friendly and let her take pictures and stuff.

-You have the photo?

-She does, but she says she can't upload it online since her manager took the picture with his feet.

The video of Lee Songha falling was quietly spreading with social media and community sites at its core.

It was different from before. It didn't suddenly appear on the real-time search rankings or was plastered on articles. However, it wasn't like the bait wasn't effective either. Instead, it was surprisingly positive.

There were more people looking positively at Lee Songha herself without the label of 'the hot topic headliner' or 'the controversy headliner'.

And this turned into a reaction towards Neptune.

-Even if Neptune's performances were good, I didn't feel like fangirling over them because of the gossip behind Lee Songha, but the fan cam slayed me. After watching this, I want to support them so much.

-Same, I agree. Ah, it's so hard to fangirl over rookie idols since they don't have any good material. T^T

-I've been looking since I was interested as well, but there's nothing. W&U, go work! What are you doing by not putting them in public network broadcasts?!

-Let's use this momentum to promote Neptune! You can't leave once you join.

There were more people talking about Neptune, and there were people who weren't satisfied with the material they found and were making their own. The number of people visiting Neptune's official homepage, which was managed by the PR team, and their fancafé increased drastically in one day.

Since the homepage, whose comment section had been bare as an empty house, kept receiving comments, it finally felt worthwhile monitoring them. The Neptune girls opened their official homepage or fancafé on their phones whenever they had the opportunity, especially Im Seoyoung, who I suspected was addicted to it.

Of course, the people making malicious comments about Lee Songha didn't disappear. However, instead of people replying to

them in the passing, there were now fans who diligently rebutted them.

The change was slow yet definitely occurring.

“What are those?”

“Presents. From your fans.”

“… Our fans?”

Although the other girls’ faces were dazed, Im Seoyoung’s was especially surprised. Her already large eyes widened even further. It seemed like her eyes would pop out if someone smacked the back of her head.

I placed the paper bags, of which I had two in each hand, in the living room of their residence.

They were presents sent to Neptune members. The company employee who gathered the presents and handed them to me laughed, saying that it was very little compared to Blackout, but it was more important that they received presents rather than how many.

This was proof they gained true fans.

“Really, are you serious?”

“Probably?”

When I said so jokingly, Im Seoyoung nervously glanced between me and the paper bags.

“Uhh, you can’t joke about things like this. Although oppa is heartless, I trust that you aren’t mean enough to joke about something as important as thi-“

“I’m taking this back.”

“No!”

When I picked up the paper bags, Im Seoyoung slid on the living room floor and clung onto me. I grinned and told the other girls to come closer as well. Although they didn’t make such a big deal out of this like Im Seoyoung, they all approached with expectant eyes.

I checked the contents of the paper bag and handed them out to the girls. Im Seoyoung received two bags while Lee Taehee and LJ each received one. I heard that there were weird people who sent garbage as presents so checked each one, but the presents sent to Im Seoyoung were of the small, cute character merchandise and doll variety.

Im Seoyoung loved her presents with teary eyes that seemed to she might cry any moment.

“Who? I wonder who sent it. Euaah… I received four dolls! How did they know I like dolls?”

“A photo was uploaded on our official social media, dummy. The one where you were bawling like someone who’s lost their country while hugging a doll.”

LJ said apathetically. Im Seoyoung, who had been enjoying looking at the dolls, instantly glared at her.

“Its leg ripped because you punched it, you gangster!”

“I did it because I was pissed at Son Chaeyoung! And I fixed it later!”

That was true. LJ sewed the ripped area together. It was quite well done. I was quite surprised by her unexpected talent. That was also uploaded on their social media, and maybe it was because of it, but LJ received a sewing box among her presents.

Lee Taehee’s presents were cough drops and red ginseng concentrate, which was effective against fatigue. Perhaps it was because she occasionally would thump her lower back or act lethargic, but it seemed she had a granny image, even though she was only 22.

After drinking a pack of red ginseng extract, Lee Taehee nodded her head. It seemed she liked it. I felt this when she was drinking the wild ginseng wine by herself, but her tastes were quite

unusual.

I took some pictures of the girls holding their presents as proof.

Then I turned my head.

"..."

Lee Songha, who had been looking vacantly for a while, tilted her head and looked behind me. After confirming there wasn't anything there, she looked at my thin coat pocket and empty hands before sitting down on the rug and flipping through the script. Although it looked like she was fine, her shoulders were slightly slumped.

"Songha, come and eat this."

Lee Taehee handed her a cough drop. Im Seoyoung and LJ, both aware that only Lee Songha didn't receive anything, hid their excited expressions. Im Seoyoung looked at me and mouthed, 'Is there really nothing?'

"Wait a little, why is he taking so-"

Just as I looked at the front door, the door burst open.

The traitor entered with quick steps.

“Sorry, they fell in the elevator, and I had to pick them back up.”

The girls’ gazes were fixed on the dolly the traitor had dragged in. There was a box and two paper bags on top of it. The box was so big I couldn’t wrap my arms around it.

Lee Songha’s eyes shined as she came closer.

“This…”

“It’s for you.”

As soon as I said that, Lee Songha opened the box. Then she opened her mouth with a blank expression.

The inside was filled with things to eat. From a large bag of chips to a small chocolate bar, the large box was filled with snacks. On a bag, there was a sincere post-it, telling her to eat this and cheer up.

“You remember Seo Jijoon’s fans, right? The people you saw on your first drama shoot.”

“Yes.”

“They sent this to cheer you on.”

Maybe it was because they saw her eating the snacks piled up on

her plate, but the present was optimized for her. Because those fans mentioned that Lee Songha liked eating after the drama shoot, her other presents were centered around food as well.

There were even hand-written letters.

The majority of them were encouraging her, telling her to cheer up even though the current situation wasn't good, to ignore the hate comments, and that they were awaiting her drama.

Lee Songha sat down with her presents and went back and forth between holding snacks and letters.

Although she didn't really show it, she was happy. She was very happy.

"Songha, you must be happy."

"Hey, you can set up a convenience store in your room."

"There's even something that was handmade! How are you going to eat something so precious?"

When I looked at the four of them chatting together, I unconsciously smiled.

"Since they received presents, I finally feel that they've become more well-known."

“I know, right?”

The traitor nodded as he said,

“If their fandom becomes more concrete, and Next K-Star, Songha’s drama, and their next album do well one after each other… They should be able to consolidate their footing by next year.”

“They have to.”

“Yeah, they do.”

I turned my head and looked at the traitor from the side.

His face gave off a nice impression, and his amiable eyes were looking at Neptune. He suddenly turned towards me. Our eyes met. Although his gaze wasn’t any different from just now, my fingers reflexively stiffened.

He smiled brightly as he said,

“We need to make it happen.”

The drama shoots were on a tight schedule.

They didn’t care about night or day, and of course, there was no start or end time for work. Depending on the situation, we had times where we arrived at night but had to wait until morning. Our meal times were erratic, and our sleeping schedule was more so.

Luckily, Lee Songha and I had a car we could rest in, but the staff slept anywhere they could sit their butts down. It was to the point where there would always be someone curled up sleeping on the emergency exit stairs during a shoot.

I was seriously curious whether there had been anyone who died of exhaustion during filming.

Luckily, since there wasn’t film shoot today due to a Next K-Star recording, I could avoid sleeping in the car. Still, I had to sleep in the night duty room at the company.

With a toothbrush in my mouth, I blankly stared at the whiteboard.

At first, Neptune’s name was as rare as a blue moon, but now that their name was posted at least two or three times a week, my heart felt plentiful even though I currently looked like I was homeless. Although the majority of them were Lee Songha’s drama schedules, I expected there to be more team schedules or other girls’ personal schedules in the future.

“Good morning.”

Kim Hyunjo, who had also slept in the night duty room, yawned as he approached. I was surprised when I looked at his face. He was someone who seemed to have dark circles tattooed to his face, but his entire face was the color of dark circles these days.

“Chief. I’m asking this because I’m really curious.”

“Huh?”

“You divided the work you had before with Gunyoung and me.”

“Yeah, I divided it a lot.”

“But why does it seem like your work hasn’t decreased?”

Weren’t recruits supposed to think, ‘Ah, I need to work hard to be like them,’ when they saw their superiors? But why did I want to slump onto the floor when I thought that I might look like Kim Hyunjo in a few years?

“Hey, you know how, when you make money, there’s always something you need to spend it on?”

“Yes.”

“When you have more time, you have more things to do.”

Kim Hyunjo smiled faintly and changed the subject as he asked,

“But when is your next drama shoot?”

“Right after the recording. We have to standby until 2 a.m.”

“Wow, they’re really pushing you hard. Why are they filming that drama every day? You guys have quite a bit of the script complete and started filming early even compared to public networks. But how are you guys busier than Mermaid out of Water?”

“Director Shin is a perfectionist.”

First, he was very picky about the continuity of shots. It wasn’t simply displaying the positions of cameras and the size of cuts, but even their emotions and details about how it would be edited filled the pages of the book detailing them.

He even took the trouble to shoot each scene in various ways.

However, there was no one who was dissatisfied with this as they believed the degree of polish would be equally high. Also, if they filmed a lot beforehand, they wouldn’t be as pressed for time once they started broadcasting.

Instead of hurriedly filming it while broadcasting, it was better to be busier now.

“There are still two weeks before the release of Cat Guardian Ghost, right?”

“Yes.”

There were 2 weeks until the drama premiered.

The interest in Cat Guardian Ghost hadn’t diminished yet. To be precise, we were managing it so that it wouldn’t drop.

We periodically released short behind-the-scenes videos, teasers, and pictures taken during the film shoot, and whenever it seemed like Lee Songha’s controversy would die down, it surged once again. This was because Producer Go Joontae from Next K-Star was using Lee Songha as kindling for viewership ratings.

That damn bastard.

Next K-Star had recently hit its highest viewership rating at 7%. As it kept rising, Producer Go Joontae was becoming too big for his shoes.

It was great that Neptune’s popularity would rise alongside the rising viewership ratings, but the problem was he was burning Lee Songha. It was because it was Lee Songha that she was able to endure this long, if it was someone else with a weaker mentality than her, they would have lost it already.

He would edit the episodes in that way yet speak nonsense about how he gave her more screen time or whatever with a deceitful smile. It was to the point I wanted to rip open his mouth.

I would only feel refreshed if I threw shit at his face.

Still, since Neptune's fans were bashing Producer Go Joontae into pulp online, I was calming my heart with that. If I didn't even have that as comfort, I really might have been unable to control my temper.

Just as I bit down on my toothbrush, becoming irritated simply thinking about it, the traitor approached me from behind. It seemed he had washed his face just now as water dripped from his bangs. When I turned around, I suddenly became shocked.

Although Kim Hyunjo was also serious, he was worse.

His face showed that he was so exhausted he could die.

Even though I knew that he was helping Kim Hyunjo prepare for Neptune's next album while I was busy with the drama, I thought that he would at least be better off than me. But what's this? His face seemed to have suffered more hardship than me.

"I'll be outside having a smoke."

His voice croaked.

“Call me when you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

After listening to my reply, he disappeared, off to find somewhere to have a smoke.

While looking at his receding figure, I asked Kim Hyunjo,

“It seems the album preparations are tough too.”

“Ah, he’s been busy with something else these days…”

Kim Hyunjo, who was in the middle of a yawn, shut his mouth as if he said something he shouldn’t have.

“Something he’s busy with?”

Although I asked right away, Kim Hyunjo shook his head.

“There’s something like that. In my eyes, he’s just wasting his time, but it still counts as experience.”

When I asked him a few more times, he adamantly said it wasn’t something he should say now as he shook his head.

Something he was busy with...

Just what was it?

Chapter 61: Begin Filming (4)

“Do you have something to say to me?”

The traitor asked.

There was no need to feel surprised as I had been looking at him ever since we arrived at the Next K-Star set.

Even now, my head kept coming up with various scenarios of betrayal and disputes. Within my head, I had been betrayed around a hundred times and had betrayed a hundred times as well.

“Yeah.”

“Do it then. Is it serious?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

I examined the traitor’s face as I said,

“The chief said you were working hard on something so I was curious what it was.”

“Ah… that.”

He glanced at me while rubbing his thumb against his lower lip.

Then his always smiling smile became slightly crooked, an awkward expression.

Soon, the traitor replied in a clear voice,

“Sorry, I don’t want to say it yet.”

“You don’t want to?”

“Let’s talk if things go well. It’ll be embarrassing if things don’t after I say it.”

The traitor patted my shoulder with a smiling face.

I would have become worked up if I heard this from anyone else, but this was Choi Gunyoung to boot. He was a dormant bomb that I could never let my guard down against even though he was the colleague I spent the most time with.

I couldn’t let the situation continue like this.

Instead of constantly thinking about when he would explode, it would be better to keep him far away...

It was when I was thinking about this with a cool head.

It had been a while since the world turned black.

I had never welcomed this severely hazy vision this much before.

How long had it been? Since I hadn't experienced this in a long while, I consciously tried to avoid thinking about my foresight ability. An ability that appeared suddenly could disappear just as quickly, and I didn't know how to find it again if it disappeared.

I didn't want to get my hopes up.

However, now that I had the future right in front of my eyes, I could tell how much I waited for this and how relieved I was. While calming my surging emotions, I concentrated all my senses to not lose a single detail.

I couldn't tell exactly where I was.

My vision had so much static, and it kept cutting off. However, what was certain was that Kim Hyunjo and the traitor were sitting in front of me. Both their hairstyles were similar to the present. There was no difference in their looks either. Kim Hyunjo wore a thick winter turtleneck.

It seemed like it was a very near future.

"Both Younghoon hyung and I thought that it would all be for nothing, but you really are a determined guy. You'll do something in life."

Astonished, Kim Hyunjo laughed.

With an expression that couldn't contain his happiness, the traitor said,

"You could say it's all thanks to Sunwoo."

Thanks to me?

When I wondered whether he had finally betrayed me or not, the traitor smiled.

"We joined on the same day and started working at the same time, but as the gap between us kept getting wider and wider, I ended up working harder."

My vision returned.

I was once again standing in front of the audience seats of the open hall. I saw the traitor when I looked to my side. He was smiling as he watched the ongoing recording. It was similar to the smile I saw in the future just now.

So... It wasn't the thing I was worried about?

Looking at how Kim Hyunjo was happy, there was a high possibility that the thing the traitor was working on would be helpful to us, namely Neptune. Since Kim Hyunjo knew about it, it

shouldn’t be something done with bad intentions.

While I was relieved, a sudden thought crossed my mind.

I had already seen the future and changed the present, and because of this, I had experienced the future changing... Could I even say that the Choi Gunyoung, who betrayed me, and the Choi Gunyoung now were the same person?

This thought crossed my mind, albeit very briefly.

Maybe, maybe this was the case.

However, as long as I couldn’t look into Choi Gunyoung’s mind and be 100% certain, I could never sincerely trust him anymore.

Also, if an opportunity of not having to see Choi Gunyoung ever presented itself, I would probably choose it.

*

“What did you want?”

TVL’s drama department director, Bae Jangho, stopped signing files and looked up. Standing in front of him were the chief producer of Cat Guardian Ghost, General Manager Song, and Director Shin Taekyun. Just as General Manager Song was about to speak after clearing his throat, Director Shin Taekyun said,

“Please give us the time slot to release a special episode.”

“Hey you, to abruptly-did you leave a time slot with the director?”

General Manager Song poked Director Shin Taekyun’s side. With a face, exhausted due to overnight filming and editing, Director Shin Taekyun frowned.

“Wasn’t what you said last time a joke?”

Director Bae asked General Manager Song.

“That time, well, I said it in a half-joking, half-sincere manner, but this time, it is sincere. When I looked at the schedule, it looked like we can squeeze it in.”

“Is the cast at the level of a blockbuster film?”

“Pardon? No, not that high.”

“Then are you confident in reaching over 10% viewership ratings?”

“Director, the hurdle is too high. 10% would be a record high.”

When General Manager Song said exaggeratingly, Director Bae said in a flat voice.

“We’ve only given special episodes to dramas like that.”

“But the situation this time is a bit different. Although it’s a hot topic right now, people’s interests are focused more on Lee Songha herself than the drama, so if we slip up, the interest in the drama might drop as soon as Lee Songha’s controversy dies down. That’s why we propose we make a special episode to brilliantly put the controversy to rest and try to absorb that interest into the drama so that interest doesn’t fade.”

“…”

At the heated persuasion, Director Bae rubbed his chin, seemingly taking things into consideration.

Director Shin Taekyun broke the silence and said,

“Then please take a look at the edit of part 1 and 2.”

At his words, Director Baek put down his fountain pen.

Two hours later, as Director Bae took his eyes off the black screen, he said,

“I’ll get you a time slot, so try it.”

4 days later, at the basement restaurant of Knet.

Producer Go Joontae was talking with the chief producer, General Manager Park.

“Hyung, if the episode we’re editing right now is released, I think it’ll hit 8%.”

“8%? On that day, I’ll pay for the get-together.”

General Manager Park, who had a fancy muffler on today as well, stirred his stew.

“Why are you so confident? Was the result of editing for two nights straight amazing?”

“Amazing. If it broadcasts, it’ll definitely show up on the real-time search rankings. Lee Songha and this Punchline member who raps. I’m trying to make a pink atmosphere flow between them, as if they are flirting with each other.”

“What?”

General Manager Park frowned. As if he didn’t see it, Producer Go Joontae smiled slyly as he continued,

“It looked like the guy from Punchline is interested in Lee

Songha. We've filmed him intensely staring at her on camera multiple times. Since Punchline has the highest popularity out of the teams, I bet if we even say 'fl' of 'fling', the reactions will be heated. Although W&U are going flip out again, if we do it like las-"

"Hey, I don't think it's a good time for that."

General Manager Park gave an awkward expression as he cut him off.

"Not good?"

"The director said he heard some news from TVL, and it seems like there are rumors that Cat Guardian Ghost, even if it's not a hit, will at the very least do well. He said they even scheduled a special episode. That's why the director told us to cast Seo Jijoon early."

"So?"

"A few producers tried, but W&U's reaction is unenthusiastic, something about wanting to focus on their current project. At this rate, even I might have to go and try to persuade them. That's why; don't bother W&U too much until we get Seo Jijoon."

Producer Go Joontae set his spoon down. His voice contained a bit of irritation.

“Hyung, I worked overnight editing this. It’s amazingly put together.”

“Since there’s still time before the broadcast, you can put it together again. I’m not telling to get scrap it completely, just keep it for now and use it once we get Seo Jijoon.”

“No, if we ask TVL’s drama department to help us, we’ll get him in no time. They’ll have to place their leads into entertainment shows to promote their drama anyways.”

“You screwed them over last time, yet you think they’re going to help?”

General Manager Park clicked his tongue. Producer Go Joontae’s face distorted after recalling what happened last time. Since they were the ones who entangled Lee Songha with Cat Guardian Ghost and created controversy first, there was no way TVL’s drama department would look at them favorably.

Producer Go Joontae had a sip of cold water and grumbled,

“Well, in the end, it was good promotion.”

“Yeah, like you said, it was great promotion. Even my daughter who doesn’t watch dramas knew what Cat Guardian Ghost was. In this situation, do you think they’ll forcefully appear on entertainment shows? When there are grand talks about a special episode?”

General Manager Park had been wiping his mouth with a napkin before his eyes abruptly shined.

“Hey, instead of that, what do you think about putting Seo Jijoon on Next K-Star?”

“What?”

“You can make whatever excuse like supporting Neptune or something when putting him on. If you get a two-shot of Lee Songha and him while they are still a hot topic, don’t you think you can hit 8%?”

Producer Go Joontae’s complexion brightened as if he had never been dissatisfied in the first place.

“You’re going to put him on my show? If that’s the case, I’ll happily accept.”

“No, I want you to cast him.”

His brightened complexion returned to its somber state.

“You said even you might have to act. How am I supposed to cast him?”

“You know Lee Songha’s manager, right? The one who goes with

her to film shoots.”

“Manager?”

As if recalling his memories, Producer Go Joontae’s eyes lowered.

“If he’s a manager who follows her to drama shoots, then it won’t be the chief. Then it’s one out of the two. The one who gives off a good impression and the one who doesn’t.”

“I heard that Lee Songha’s manager and Seo Jijoon’s chief are good friends. How about you ask him? I heard Seo Jijoon listens to that chief.”

Producer Go Joontae tilted his head as if he heard something wrong.

“What do you want me to do? You want me to cling to a road manager and ask him for a favor?”

“Not cling, I’m just wondering what if you asked him. It’s not like me, the chief producer, can do it. And think about it. Imagine if you, who’s good at getting high viewership ratings, cast Seo Jijoon, who other producers couldn’t get. How favorably the director will view you.”

Once the director was mentioned, Producer Go Joontae’s expression softened.

After thinking about it silently for a while, he opened his mouth.

“… Okay, whatever, I’ll do it.”

The moment General Manager Park rejoiced, Producer Go Joontae crossed his legs and added,

“If that drama gets better ratings than my show.”

*

The air felt different this morning.

Although it was a bit comical, it was true.

Should I say the density of the air was higher? Or that it felt a bit heavier? Either way, it felt different from normal.

I waited a long time for this day, but when deciding day was finally here, I was simply blank. Did I sleep too much? It felt like that could be why. As I yawned, looking out my window, my phone underneath my blanket vibrated.

When I turned it on after fumbling for it, I had a ton of texts and messages.

There were some from my parents and my brother's family, and some from my friends.

There were also ones from Reporter Park Woojeong, company employees, Neptune, and even from TVL and Pan Production. Besides them, I also received some from reporters, producers, and writers I didn't know the names of. Although it felt like my phone became more popular once I started this job, today was a record high.

Looking through them, there was a common narrative among them.

'I saw the article.'

I got up and sat in front of my laptop.

As soon as I accessed the portal site, a headline caught my attention on the homepage.

{'Cat Guardian Ghost' Special Episode, Staff are going to 'put the controversies to rest before proceeding'.}

{The much-discussed 'Cat Guardian Ghost' will be unveiling itself tonight with a special episode.}

After seeing that, my mind became clear.

It really was today.

Today was the day Cat Guardian Ghost would begin broadcasting, starting with a special episode. Also, like the confident comments on the headlines, it was also the day the controversies, which went on for over a month, would be put to rest.

I took deep breaths before examining the public's opinion on the internet.

-Put the controversies to rest before proceeding? Look at the staff's spirit shiver

-They are finally doing it lol I waited for this more than my year-end bonus lol I'm not really interested in the drama but very curious of Lee Songha's acting skills.

-If her acting is terrible after making this into such a hot topic, it'll become a notorious con.

-It might become a notorious reversal.

-Since there are a lot of people waiting to put her down, it'll be difficult to reverse things with decent acting. If only they didn't talk about Lee Songha being a genius to the press, she wouldn't have such extreme haters.

-It'll be hard with decent acting skills. It looks like she needs to

method act for them to acknowledge and praise her.

-Look at how hot this topic is after all this time since the controversy broke out shiver I bet it'll be funny af just watching people's reactions. I'll prepare some beer beforehand.

Reading through them, my lips unconsciously curled into a smile.

The reactions were the hottest yet.

The people who would write hate comments directed at Lee Songha, the people who would watch this with interest, and those who would cheer her on as fans, they joined together to create a massive wave. Whether they had good motives or bad, everyone would sit in front of the TV tonight.

That was enough for now.

I closed my laptop. A few questions hovered over my head.

How well would Cat Guardian Ghost do? Once the cast changed and it was swept up in an enormous controversy, it was already vastly different from the drama I saw in the future. However, I had seen Director Shin Taekyun's directing skills and the cast's acting.

I didn't think drama would flop, not one bit.

What I was curious about was how successful would it be?

Also, with today as a starting point, what would change by how much?

I took a shower to clear my mind and leisurely prepared to go to work. There wasn't a Next K-Star recording or Cat Guardian Ghost filming today. Neptune members were to stay home today, and Kim Hyunjo, the traitor, and I were going to meet at the company before heading to their residence.

We planned on watching Cat Guardian Ghost's special episode together like when we monitored Next K-Star's first broadcast last time.

I put my laptop in my bag and left my apartment.

Then, 8 hours later, I placed my laptop on my knees then clicked the refresh button.

-I'm on my way home from work, did Cat Guardian Ghost start?!

-They are still playing commercials. Ah, they ended now.

-It's starting!

Chapter 62: Begin Filming (5)

TVL. Master control room.

This place was noisier than a marketplace today. From employees responsible for airing to employees from other teams, they were all scrambling noisily while waving banknotes.

“2.5% for me.”

“Don’t you know that it’s damn hot right now? 3% for me.”

“3.3%.”

“Stop! Stop! The director is coming!”

As soon as someone shouted hurriedly, the control room’s door flung open. Then Director Bae and General Manager Song of the drama department, as well as Director Shin Taekyun, entered. As it was a drama with so much interest, they planned on tracking the viewership rating in the master control room today.

The people who had been whispering amongst each other quickly left while clearing their throats.

“You’re betting on the viewership rating again.”

The technical director showed a bashful smile at General

Manager Song's words. General Manager Song intercepted a post-it, which had the evidence of betting on the viewership ratings, and read it.

"Almost all are 3%?"

"Because the reactions are so heated, everyone held higher standards. Still, with this mood, it might reach 4% if we're lucky..."

"I bet 50,000 won that it'll be higher than 4%."

General Manager Song took out a banknote from his wallet. The master control room employees showed startled expressions.

"General manager, isn't that too much?"

"There are tons of dramas that don't reach 4% by the time they end."

"I bet on 5%."

It was Director Shin Taekyun this time. A 50,000-won-bill swayed in his hand.

The technical team and programming team employees read the mood as they accepted their money. Afterwards, they whispered to each other that those men probably counted their chickens before

they hatched in quiet voices so they wouldn't hear.

However, the employees had to retract their thoughts in a few minutes.

"2 minutes in... Huh?"

The assistant manager, who had been checking the time, halted after checking the graph recording the minute ratings in real-time. TVL's minute ratings were rising at a rate incomparable to other cable channels on at the same time.

"This, right now, uh, what the, it's already over 2%?"

"What? Is that true?"

A programming team employee read the mood behind him as he even tapped on the monitor. During this time, the line on the graph was quickly rising at a steep angle.

The technical director gulped his saliva and mumbled,

"How high will it rise?"

"Don't tell me it's going to reach 3% before it starts?"

Then that possibility became a reality.

“We-we reached 3% minute ratings at the start!”

At the better-than-expected start, the master control room became noisy.

Cat Guardian Ghost’s title screen flashed by. Then the best highlights picked from the edited version swept through. Cuts of the lead and supporting actors passed by at a breathtaking pace until it came to a sudden stop.

It was Lee Songha.

As if the director had planned it this way, there were a ton of highlight scenes of Lee Songha.

The technical director forgot to pay attention to the graph as he looked at the screen.

He had expected she would be good at acting since there had been a rumor that she was a great actress spreading within TVL. However, he didn’t have high hopes. While he was in charge of the broadcasting in the master control room, he had seen his fill of actors who received high praise. Therefore, most things he saw weren’t exciting anymore.

However, he clicked his tongue.

‘Do you think I would have said that she was a natural without any truth? I even asked her to get psychological counseling.’

An interview with a camera operator followed after veteran actress Jang Yoonok’s words.

‘Why, you know those actors that come up occasionally. The ones that seem possessed by their character? I sometimes got shivers when I looked at her through a camera.’

The scene changed to the film set. A Lee Songha with a cold, depressed expression was edited next to a different Lee Songha, who was following behind her manager to maximize their contrast.

The technical director nodded his head without knowing.

Wouldn’t this be what people call possessed?

“Uh… I-it passed 4%!”

At the cracking voice, the technical director came to his senses.

Everyone looked at the minute ratings monitor. The moment they saw the graph, which had passed 4%, someone screamed in excitement. Soon after, a round of applause broke out.

“We’re almost triple GTBN right now, triple!”

“A-at this rate, won’t it really reach 5%?”

General Manager Song clenched his fists.

“Director, what did I say? This is a hit! As soon as it’s been unveiled, the ratings passed 4%, 4%! If it’s like this, we can compete against public networks!”

Director Bae nodded. Although he had a serious face, he too was stealthily clenching his fists.

“Director Shin, Shin Taekyun! You worked hard, buddy! Now, all we need to do is keep rising to the top! First, let CEO Kim Pansuk and W&U’s CEO Baek Hansung know the news, no, I’ll personally call-“

“Please watch quietly, general manager.”

Director Shin Taekyun said. He hadn’t taken his eyes off the minute by minute ratings for a while now. The chattering employees, director, and even the general manager once again looked at the monitor. No one could open their mouths.

Within the silence filled with excitement, the ratings graph gradually rose higher.

Son Chaeyoung was sitting on her sofa with her legs crossed as

she stared at her TV.

There was only one thought on her mind.

Fail.

Because of Lee Songha and her manager, whom she didn't want to see, she had a loss of appetite these days. She was the kind of person who couldn't do anything if something bothering her. Only once she saw that drama go under with less than 1% ratings would her mind be at peace.

Veteran actress Jang Yoonok's interview sounded from the TV.

'Do you think I would have said that she was a natural...'

Son Chaeyoung, who had been biting her nails, threw whatever she could get her hands on at the TV.

"Aren't her eyes skewed? Well, that's probably why she's doing cable with her experience."

Soon the screen changed to show a scene of Lee Songha acting in the role of Jung Haewon. Son Chaeyoung unconsciously lowered her arm at the chilling scene.

Her hairs stood on their end.

She bit hard on her lower lip. Unable to continue looking at the screen any longer, she took her eyes off it and irritably pulled her laptop close. In times like these, it was best to look at hate comments swearing at Lee Songha to change her mood. Her mind would quickly relax like a calm lake.

As soon as she opened a portal site, Lee Songha's name was first on real-time search rankings.

Even the articles on the main page and the countless articles below it all had Lee Songha's name on them. The keywords were 'sweeping away her acting controversy'. 'netizens' applause', 'best acting'...

Reporters, what do they know?

Comments. Comments will be fine. Haters don't change.

She went to a site that would indiscriminately curse and hate female celebrities. There were tons of related articles and comments. Son Chaeyoung's lips curled upwards.

-It looks like the director ground his teeth to make this and put the controversies to rest. Just look at this we can tell she's good at acting.

-Are all the people who had been swearing at her, saying she wouldn't be good at acting, kicking their blankets? It's so quiet. I knew this would happen.

-With no experience, and no talks about her learning acting for a long time, she got hate because they said she was a natural or whatever, at looking at her now, it seems saying that she's a natural was reasonable. It doesn't even look like she's acting.

-Even Jang Yoonok asked her to consult with a psychologist. I'm a little worried tbh.

-But it looks like this will have incredibly high ratings. The drama looks like a heck of a lot of fun.

"What is this!"

Astonished, Son Chaeyoung threw her laptop. Still angry, she threw her remaining pots, remote, and even the Mermaid out of Water script in irritation.

Nervously going back and forth in her living room, Son Chaeyoung called Chief Jo. A commercial was playing after the Cat Guardian Ghost broadcast had ended.

"Oppa, what were its ratings? You checked, right?"

When she shouted fiercely, Chief Jo mumbled in a reluctant voice.

-That is, umm, Chaeyoung...

“What were its ratings?! 2%? 3%?”

-So that is, that… Haaa.

Son Chaeyoung’s forehead distorted at the ominous sigh.

“…. Don’t tell me it’s 4%?”

-Chaeyoung. Once Mermaid out of Water comes out, it’ll get great ratings too. You can get twice, no, triple the ratings of Cat Guardian Ghost. So….

“That’s obvious! So what are its ratings?!”

-I’ll te-text you.

Chief Jo hung up as if he was distancing himself from a bomb. Then, a few seconds later, a text appeared on her phone. After hurriedly checking it, Son Chaeyoung stiffened. She blinked her eyes but the number didn’t change.

“Nonsense…”

A chaotic aura appeared in her eyes.

Soon after, Son Chaeyoung began screaming as she smashed the

items around her.

At the same time, a low laughter echoed in the CEO's office at W&U.

"If it's like this from the start, then I'll expectant how high it'll go from now. Don't worry about her condition. I'll look out for her, and even now... she has a good manager."

After exchanging a few more pleasant words, CEO Baek Hansung hung up.

After placing his phone down, he stood up from his chair. Then he walked a few steps and stood in front of a wall. It was packed with pictures of celebrities under W&U.

He rubbed his lips as he gazed at an empty space. It was the place Sung Dowon's picture had been hung. Thinking about putting Lee Songha there instead, he suddenly lowered his gaze.

He looked at a picture of a brightly smiling Son Chaeyoung.

He silently looked at the picture before stretching his hand out.

With the tip of his long finger, he tapped on her face as if in thought.

And in Jongno District. In G-Today's entertainment

department’s office.

Reporter Park Woojeong glanced at the clutter of references and materials on her desk as she passionately tapped on her keyboard. Her hair, which she pulled on intermittently, had already become a rat’s nest.

Other employees passed by her while clicking their tongues. Not caring about them, she leaned her face closer to the monitor as if she was about to crawl in it. Her screen was scattered with Cat Guardian Ghost’s broadcast, real-time search rankings, and reaction comments.

“”Hey, what are you doing?”

Surprised, she turned around to see a man with a messy beard standing behind her.

“Ah, general manager.”

“Don’t you know that everyone’s pouring out articles about Lee Songha? You should be publishing articles even a second faster, why are you holding onto it so much?”

“I’m a bit close with Lee Songha’s manager so I wanted to write it earnestly… I’ll publish it immediately!”

“No, no, wait!”

Hastily grabbing Reporter Park Woojeong's shoulder, her general manager asked,

"You're close with Lee Songha's manager?"

"Yes."

"Hey, you should have told me. People are desperately trying to get an interview with Lee Songha and anyone involved right now."

Her general manager's eyes shined as he added,

"Ask the manager for an interview."

*

Kim Hyunjo frowned. After looking back at his phone a couple times, he asked again,

"What percent was it?"

While listening to what the other side was saying, Kim Hyunjo's expression gradually turned strange. Like meerkats, we stretched our necks and looked at Kim Hyunjo.

Just what was it? What percent was it? I was so curious I could

die. It must have done better than Next K-Star since people's reactions were incomparably more heated than that. Also, internet aside, my phone was creating a fuss for a while now. The calls and messages this morning were cute compared to right now. I felt that my fingerprints would wear out writing all those replies.

Just then, Kim Hyunjo hung up. Im Seoyoung immediately asked,

"What percent was it?! Quickly, quickly tell me! I'm going to die of anticipation!"

Kim Hyunjo slumped onto the sofa.

Then he looked at each of us once, especially Lee Songha and me.

"5th place in TVL's all-time drama ratings was 5.9%. Winter Sun."

What was this all of a sudden?

"But they said Cat Guardian Ghost hit 6% today. Since they only have the real-time ratings right now, we won't know precisely until tomorrow, but it won't be much different."

For a moment, no one showed any sort of reaction. Everyone was probably deciphering the number Kim Hyunjo had just said.

I was too.

Although my expectations were high since the reactions on the internet were so explosive...

6%?

A cable drama, that only just started, got 6%?

“Al-all-time 5th... Doesn’t that mean it’s really good?”

Im Seoyoung stuttered. LJ had a dazed expression as she said,

“Is... n’t it? I mean how many dramas have TVL broadcasted so far.”

“Oppa, right? It’s a success, right?”

Im Seoyoung slapped my back with both hands as she asked.

I gulped my saliva and replied,

“No.”

“No?!”

“It’s a resounding success.”

Im Seoyoung screamed at the top of her lungs. Lee Taehee and LJ stuck next to Lee Songha with bright complexions. Then, with Lee Songha, who was still caught up in the lingering feelings after the broadcast, in the middle, the two chatted noisily. Of course, 95% of it was Im Seoyoung’s voice, but their voices clearly contained their excitement.

After ending a call with someone else, Kim Hyunjo gestured to me.

“It’s Team Leader Park, and she says it’s crazy in the PR team right now.”

“Crazy?”

“She said inquiries by people who now want a piece of the cake are flooding in. Since there are so many calls, she said it’s not a PR team but a call center. Apparently, she said it already feels like the drama hit 10% ratings.”

As his smile curled all the way up his ears, Kim Hyunjo slapped my arm.

“How do you feel?”

How do I feel, huh?

“Although you only brought the opportunity for Neptune to appear on Next K-Star, isn’t this time something you brought up with your own hands? You received the synopsis, pushed Lee Songha to act, and even preparations for the audition and film shoots. What you brought up has become a success right now, so how do you feel?”

How do I feel now that the first drama I was involved with has broadcasted?

“Well, I mean.”

I grinned as I said,

“Fantastic.”

Kim Hyunjo laughed loudly like a drunken person.

I was filled with pride. My chest felt stiff, and my heart felt like it would explode. If there wasn’t anyone here, I might have shouted refreshingly. Also, I might have called my parents and my brother and bragged on and on. They would all be very happy.

I clenched my fists.

Like Kim Hyunjo said, I had suffered hardships and brought it up to this point, and it returned to me as a great success. I felt that I

accomplished something that I could hold with my own two hands, drunk from people's acknowledgment of me and my fruits of labor. It was an amazing feeling.

I looked at Lee Songha, who was buried under the girls, receiving their congratulations. She had been gawking just now, but she was smiling brightly right now, perhaps due to the girls causing such a large commotion.

Yeah, smile. It's a day you can't help but smile.

The people who had hated on Lee Songha were dispirited, pushed aside by the masses. Instead, it felt like there were people crowding at hate comments, tearing them apart. This was because there were people uploading evidence of others who had previously hated and bashed Lee Songha because of her controversies, and sympathy for Lee Songha spreading like wildfire. Neptune's fan cafe, as well as Cat Guardian Ghost's fan cafe, were filled with supportive comments.

From now on, she wouldn't have to suffer like in the past.

Now, there was no need to take Lee Songha's phone away, and there would be no need to feel down because of people's mocking looks anymore.

As if she noticed my gaze, Lee Songha looked at me. Our eyes momentarily met. Her picturesque eyes smiled slightly. How many emotions passed by in that brief moment? If possible, I wanted to stop time and closely examine them.

Lee Songha, who was about to approach me, was grabbed by Im Seoyoung's hand and was shaken, while I turned my head at Kim Hyunjo's call.

"Anyways, I bet the mood at Neptune's album meeting will be great tomorrow because of this."

"Ah."

"Team Leader Park told me to bring you, saying that there are a lot of people who want to see you."

Kim Hyunjo gave a meaningful smile.

"Ah, right. You really are a lucky charm. Even when I saw you for the first time, I..."

He went on about the repertoire I had heard multiple times.

Soon, we began a simple celebration, although it later changed to a drinking party once Kim Hyunjo brought out another wild ginseng wine the team 3 leader gave him. I felt this last time as well, but the wine's effects were amazing. After two hours, there was almost no one in their right mind anymore.

Lee Songha, who had been nodding her head constantly, eventually slumped over. When I barely managed to lean her

against the sofa, she had a faint smile as she mumbled something. Just what was she eating in her dreams after finishing off a chicken?

I looked at the living room, which looked more like a mess than a girl group's residence, and at the people who were collapsed like stragglers, but there was someone missing.

The traitor wasn't here.

Now that I thought about it, I felt like I didn't see him for a while. Did he go out to smoke again?

*

After hanging up, Choi Gunyoung entered the quiet residence.

It seemed they had dragged the Neptune members back to their rooms as only Kim Hyunjo and Jung Sunwoo were wearing their outerwear as they nodded off.

Choi Gunyoung stood in front of Jung Sunwoo and looked down at him.

You couldn't find a smile on his always smiling face. He was cold and rigid like lead.

He clenched his phone in his hand as he thought that if today was

Jung Sunwoo’s day, then tomorrow would be his.

Chapter 63: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (1)

-Want to come up to the 5th floor for a bit before the meeting?

Just looking at the message, it looked like it might be an office relationship, but in reality, it was Team Leader Park.

What office relationship? I didn't even have enough time to eat and sleep.

Holding coffee in both hands, I went up to the 5th floor. Buying and bringing coffee whenever I came here had become a habit. Well, it was good since I was able to get closer to Team Leader Park and other PR team employees because of this.

I opened the door and entered like usual before halting.

What the?

Around three to four people suddenly stood up. There were unfamiliar faces as well as a few who I saw roaming around the company like poltergeists.

Either way, the important thing was that it seemed like they were waiting for me.

"Are you the guy?"

Who’s the guy?

But before that, to speak so informally at our first meeting… Well, I guess he did look old enough to.

“Team Leader Park, is he the guy?”

So who is the guy?

While I stood there, puzzled, Team Leader Park received the coffee from my hands as she said,

“That’s right. He’s Team 3’s Lucky Charm, the one who hit jackpot with Cat Guardian Ghost.”

“Oh, no wonder, he looks like it!”

Wait, what do you by I look like it?

The group of people said a few things to me, like congratulating me on the drama doing well, telling me that, for someone so young, I possessed a good discerning eye and that I would become a success. While saying this, they looked at me with shining eyes. What was this uneasy feeling I felt? They looked like the eyes the quadruplets had when they looked rare animals last time I took them to the zoo.

“There’s something I really want to ask you.”

The middle-aged man who spoke casually to me took something from his jacket. They were two pictures of eye-catchingly beautiful women. Were they their profile pictures?

“They are marriage candidates for my son. Who looks better of the two?”

“Pardon?”

I thought I had heard wrong.

Taken aback, I looked towards Team Leader Park who had her back turned on me, hold back her laughter. I saw her shoulders move up and down. Behind her, the female employee and the male employee of the PR team were laughing while drinking coffee. I hope you burn your tongues.

It wasn’t only the middle-aged man, the rest were the same. Someone’s manager said that there were overlapping schedules this upcoming Lunar New Year’s Day and asked me which one they should do. Another one took out scenarios and asked me which would do well.

Seriously, would my social image be okay like this?

Of course not.

I spent a long time telling them I was just lucky. I was barely able to send these people, who were clinging to me, telling me to choose without feeling pressure or that if I wanted a fee that they'd pay it, back. As soon as the office became quiet, Team Leader Park burst into laughter as she said,

"I told you there were a lot of people who wanted to see you."

"I never thought it would be for this sort of reason."

At my words, the employees grinned as they chatted.

"It makes sense considering what Mr. Sunwoo has done. The most important thing, as well as the most difficult thing, in this industry is decision-making. Whether that decision is regarding a person or a project."

"You said that you thought the drama will be a hit after reading a synopsis others thought wasn't very good, pushed forward with it, and it eventually became successful.'

"Not just that but an unbelievably great success. I think that either there really is something about Mr. Sunwoo or you used your entire life's worth of luck this time."

"Doesn't the second severely lack in hopes and dreams?"

As they chatted, I was busy thinking in my mind.

I shouldn’t say things like the vibes I felt, that something would be a hit with certainty from now on. Maybe once or twice was okay, but if it kept repeating like this, then there would be more and more people who would find this strange as well as suspicious.

Just as I was about to leave after we talked, a sudden thought crossed my mind.

“Ah, right. Team leader, I have something I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“There’s a reporter I’m sort of close with from G-Today. Why, I mentioned her last time.”

As if she remembered, Team Leader Park nodded.

“Ah, the reporter I told you to bring to your side?”

“Yes. That reporter asked me if I could do an interview.”

I received a call from Reporter Park Woojeong this morning. She said that she had no choice because her general manager ordered her to, asking me in a careful voice.

To be honest, we received a lot of inquiries, asking for interviews, during Lee Songha's controversies. Though, we did reject them all because the more people talked about it, the more it would invite disaster and because if we held interviews with a few media platforms, the others would make a fuss. We planned on holding an interview in a hotel at a later date with the reporters.

When I told Reporter Park about this, I received another call a little later.

"She said that she won't ask about Songha's controversies and only wanted to listen to my story as Neptune's manager."

"It looks like they think the reactions will be quite good if they release an exclusive interview even if they don't have the main person. Well, you do have a lot of stories starting with when you brought Next K-Star over..."

Mumbling, Team Leader Park became lost in thought momentarily.

She seemed to be thinking of something as she examined me with narrow eyes, rubbed her chin. Very thoroughly. Closely. Then she smiled.

"Let's talk about it later. But besides that."

Team Leader Park asked,

“Will it be okay to sell your face on TV?”

Team Leader Park stared at me.

Kim Hyunjo stared at me too.

“A Lunar New Year’s entertainment special?”

When I asked while scratching my cheek, Kim Hyunjo told me the details.

“Yeah. It’s IBC’s. It’s a format where celebrities and managers appear together. Apparently, they look at the chemistry between celebrity and their manager rather than celebrity standing. Also, they are apparently looking for broadcast-worthy characters amongst the managers as they are normal people.”

“It might be achievable since the public’s opinion of Songha is good after the broadcast last night.”

Appearing on an entertainment program.

“Why me? There’s the chief, and Gunyoung as well.”

Team Leader Park gave Kim Hyunjo a thorough glance as she said,

“Look, look. Mr. Hyunjo doesn’t have the entertainment feel. He seems more like someone who should appear on Extreme Jobs.”

That was true.

I nodded my head while looking at Kim Hyunjo’s tired face, which resembled a zombie’s. Anyone would be concerned that he might die from overworking when looking at him. As if he also acknowledged this, he smacked his lips and added,

“And Gunyoung, don’t you think it’ll be difficult to persuade the staff with him? He looks too much like a youth with an upright lifestyle. He looks cultured, not the entertainment-type.”

Then what did I look like?

“You have a good character. And your chemistry with the girls isn’t bad either.”

I did consider it for a bit before eventually nodding my head.

Although my preference wasn’t standing in front of the camera, my face had already been displayed quite a bit. My reactions had been filmed in Next K-Star a few times, and I often appeared in the Cat Guardian Ghost behind-the-scenes videos.

If it was a Lunar New Year’s special, then it would only be a one-off event. Since it was an opportunity for Neptune to appear on a public network as a group, why not sell my face a little?

After finishing our chat, I went down to the 4th floor with Kim Hyunjo.

Since the weather was chilly, I had been hoping I could have some hot soup to warm my insides for lunch before I stopped abruptly. I glanced over Kim Hyunjo, who was walking a few steps ahead of me. The thick turtleneck he was wearing caught my eye.

It wasn't something he wore often. Where did I see it before?

Ah.

I recalled it immediately once I flipped through my memories. Kim Hyunjo was wearing that in the future I saw not long ago.

Was it just a coincidence he wore the same clothes?

Or was today the day?

Right before the album meeting, a drama film shoot was abruptly scheduled.

Although it was a film shoot I had to attend even if I was sleeping, the timing was amazing. Why did it have to be today? I had no choice but to skip the meeting and go to the film set with Lee Songha. If there was any consolation, it was that the staff and actors were excited and the mood on the film set was best yet due

to yesterday's broadcast.

After filming, I brought Lee Songha to her residence and immediately returned to work.

Was today was the day I saw in the future, and if it was, what had the traitor prepared?

I was so curious I couldn't even focus on the film set.

Whatever it was, it should be beneficial for Neptune.

That was what I thought when I reviewed what I was in the future. Separate from the fact I couldn't trust the traitor 100%, there was no doubt the traitor was working hard and putting in effort for Neptune. So there wasn't a need to be too worried.

When I called Kim Hyunjo and let him know I arrived, he told me to come up to the meeting room on the 5th floor. Just as I entered the meeting room after almost running up to the 5th floor, I was certain.

It was now. The future I saw not too long ago was right in front of me.

There was a laptop with a tangled pair of earphones on the table, and Kim Hyunjo and the traitor were talking, seated next to each other. It was a good mood. There was a bright smile on Kim Hyunjo's face for a change and a clear sense of happiness on the

traitor's.

"Oh, you're here. Come in, come in."

Kim Hyunjo, who saw me first, gestured with his hands.

I came to my senses and entered. As soon as I sat down, the traitor asked,

"It must be tough since it's cold these days. Are you done filming for the day?"

"No, I have to go out later tonight for a night scene."

After exchanging a few words, Kim Hyunjo joined in with a pleased voice.

"Not too long ago, while working with a bastard, I wondered what kind of sins I committed in my previous life to have had to work with such bad people. But it seems like it was all to meet you guys. One guy brought home a hit drama without me ordering him to and another…"

His eyes which momentarily fell on the traitor turned to me.

"Simon Lee, that fellow. There's a song he made for Seraphic."

Unexpected names popped out from his mouth. Simon Lee, a judge on Next K-Star and a star songwriter, as well as Seraphic, a top girl group that debuted 10 years ago.

As soon as I thought this, like cold water being poured on me, my mind jolted.

Neptune's next album. What the traitor had been working hard for a long time. And a songwriter.

Oh, my god. I had an ominous feeling.

"But after their world tour, Seraphic's been busy trying to enter the U.S. industry and their Korean comeback has constantly been pushed back. So the song doesn't have an owner anymore. To be honest, we also wanted it for our next album's title track, but that fellow seemed like he was going to give it to a girl group on a slightly lower level than Seraphic. That why we gave up..."

Kim Hyunjo grabbed the traitor's shoulder.

"He said he'll try to persuade him, and I have no idea what methods he used, but he got it from him."

I barely managed to control my expression and congratulated him. I couldn't show them that I was taken aback. Congratulations were in order as he persuaded Simon Lee and obtained the song they wanted, and there was no way they knew what I knew. That, if things progressed like normal, then Neptune's next album title

track would take first place on music programs.

My mind twisted into a tangled knot. I continued to listen while suppressing the urge to rub my face.

“First, the reactions from the internal meeting were good. Well, the CEO and Neptune have to listen to it, and we’ll make a final decision once a few monitors listen to it as well. I think this will be the title track.”

Kim Hyunjo looked at the traitor, astonished.

“Both Younghoon hyung and I thought that it would all be for nothing, but you really are a determined guy. You’ll do something in life.”

I knew what would happen afterwards.

When I looked towards the traitor, our eyes met as he too looked at me.

Unlike the previously noise-filled vision, now that I was looking at him clearly, the traitor’s expression looked slightly complicated. He was happy, yet he also possessed a strange excitement. His lips curled upwards before opening.

“You could say it’s all thanks to Sunwoo. We joined on the same day and started working at the same time, but as the gap between us kept getting wider and wider, I ended up working harder.”

It definitely changed.

The event of the traitor bringing Simon Lee's song probably didn't happen in the future set 20 years later that I saw. Since, in that future, events like me bringing Next K-Star and Cat Guardian Ghost and tasting success probably didn't occur either.

Then, what was the probability?

The probability that the song which was Neptune's title track in the future set twenty years from now and the song the traitor brought would be the same.

I gulped down my saliva and asked,

"What kind of song is it?"

"Listen to it yourself and see how it is."

Kim Hyunjo handed me the pair of earphones. They were smaller than coins, yet they felt heavy as stone. As soon as I put them on, it became quiet.

Soon, I heard the instrumentals flowing into my ears.

I wasn't very interested in the song, and although I didn't possess an ability that let me know if a song would be popular the moment

I listened to it, even I could tell it was a good song. Even though there weren't any lyrics, only humming, I wanted to hum along with it.

However, it wasn't the song I heard from the future.

I was going crazy.

It felt like everything was going smoothly just this morning, but what was this all of a sudden?

Aside from Simon Lee's song the traitor brought over, I listened to the songs collected during the song collection period that were discussed during the internal meetings. However, the song I heard from the future wasn't there. How strange.

Why wasn't it there?

Was it because the future twenty years from now was different from the present?

Was that why the song that should have been collected wasn't?

The song the traitor brought was a good song. There was no doubt about it since Simon Lee made it and the other employees of the internal meetings all said it was good. However, like dramas and movies, it wasn't like a song would become an amazing hit because it was made by a famous songwriter or because it was a good song. It had to suit the group, and it also largely depended on

luck.

Above all, Director Park from the future said that the song was really good and it matched Neptune well.

The song was definitely out there somewhere, but no matter how much I thought about it, there was no way to find it. It wasn't like I could go to the countless number of songwriters and ask them to let me listen to their songs.

Was progressing with Simon Lee's song, which the traitor brought, the best?

If we did, would it be a hit song that you would think of when you thought of Neptune like the one from the future?

"Oppa."

When I turned around towards the voice, Lee Songha was looking at me. Only then did I become aware of my surroundings. Even if my head was complicated, I had to follow the schedule so I was on my way to the Cat Guardian Ghost film set with Lee Songha once again.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I was just thinking about your next album."

At my words, Lee Songha leaned towards the front seat and said,

“We listened to it too. Will the song made by Mr. Simon Lee be our title track?”

“It’s not decided yet, but they say there’s a likely chance it will.”

“That’s a bit of a bummer.”

A bummer? What was?

Before I could ask, Lee Songha mumbled in a quiet voice,

“The song Taehee unni made was good too.”

Chapter 64: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (2)

It felt like I was hit on the head with a hammer.

I gripped the steering wheel. I felt my heart, which had stopped in surprise, beating restlessly. Lee Songha's words echoed in my mind. 'The song Taehee unni made was good too. The song Taehee unni made…'

That's right. Lee Taehee also wrote songs!

Why didn't I think of this until now? When I had first promoted Neptune to Producer Go Joontae, I had even said that Lee Taehee was skilled in both writing songs and lyrics with my own mouth.

Was it this?

Was this song written by Lee Taehee the title track from the original future?

"What kind of song is it?"

My lips felt dry. My voice sounded a little hoarse. It seemed she didn't notice anything weird about me as Lee Songha gently placed her chin on the back of the passenger seat. When I glanced towards her, I saw Lee Songha's eyes under the dim lights. Her eyes, which had been cloudy due to accumulated exhaustion, became gentle.

“I really like it.”

“Really?”

“It’s a fun, fast song, but for some reason, I feel that it’s our song whenever I hear it.”

Our song?

“I think about the unnies, and I even recall the times we were sad and gloomy because our albums constantly failed even though we tried really hard. I recall how much of a fuss everyone made when we got a call from oppa the day we were cast for Next K-Star. I remember us not sleeping a wink that night in fear the decision would be reversed. Also… The times I ran away when oppa kept asking me to act.”

Lee Songha, who had been talking quietly, looked at me and revealed a faint smile.

“Maybe it’s because of this, but I feel like I can sing that song really well.”

The entire time we were going to the film set, I brooded over Lee Songha’s words.

My thoughts that it might be a possibility slowly became more

concrete. A song that made one recall Neptune's past. If that was the case, it also matched what Director Park had said about how it was a song that suited Neptune.

But why didn't she put it out during the time they were looking for songs?

Did she feel pressure in showing off a song she personally wrote during this important time? That shouldn't be the case. Maybe if it was a digital single, but we were preparing a mini-album this time. Even if it wasn't the title track, there was still a chance it could appear on the album.

Why didn't she say anything?

After fumbling through my own thoughts, I shook my head.

I wouldn't be able to come up with an answer by thinking about it myself.

I had to meet Lee Taehee and talk with her first.

It was 10 p.m. when we arrived at Neptune's residence after we finished filming the night scenes.

I woke Lee Songha, who was wrapped up in such thick clothes it made one confused whether it was thick padding or a sleeping bag, up. As we entered the residence together, Lee Songha, who had been wobbling, tilted her head as if abruptly coming to her senses.

“You’re going to go in too?”

“Yeah. I want to listen to the song Taehee made. You said it was good.”

Lee Songha’s eyes widened at my words. Soon, a silent giggle escaped her lips. It seemed she was in a good mood as her padded sleeves, which were as long as a scarecrow’s, shook back and forth.

As soon as we pressed the passcode and entered, Im Seoyoung, who was lying flat on the rug, seemingly rolled to a stand. It seemed she had been watching a rebroadcast of Next K-Star as the faces of the three judges appeared on the screen. While my eyes were momentarily fixed on Simon Lee’s face, Im Seoyoung came up to us.

“You worked hard! It was really cold outside, Songha, you must be frozen solid. Quickly go take a hot shower. You’re qualified to use as much hot water as you want.”

They seemed to have heard us chatting as Lee Taehee and LJ came out from their own rooms. Walking leisurely, Lee Taehee brushed Lee Songha’s hair with her fingers. Her hair, which had become tangled due to sleeping in the car, was tidied smoothly.

Im Seoyoung asked,

“But why did you come together? Are you planning on reading

the script this late at night?”

“No, I came here because I wanted to talk about something with Taehee.”

Lee Taehee tilted her head at my reply.

“Me?”

“Songha said the song you made was good, so I was curious.”

“... Song?”

I summarized the conversation we had in the car.

When she heard Lee Songha’s thoughts on it, Lee Taehee looked at Lee Songha with a warm gaze. Then she tangled up the hair she had just brushed. Although it looked like she was slightly hesitant, she eventually led me to her room.

Though I had glimpses of her room through the opened door occasionally, this was my first time entering it. It was clean, no, desolate overall.

Then something strongly grabbed my attention.

She had a desk the size of a bed with a laptop and a mini

keyboard on top of it. Next to them were beer cans. One, two, three... There was no doubt she drank them like soda. This wasn't dangerous, right? As if she saw my gaze, Lee Taehee coolly dumped the cans into the trash.

"It's that."

She plopped onto her chair and gestured to her laptop screen.

At a glance, I could see it was filled with complicated looking tools. I stood right behind her chair. Lee Songha, Im Seoyoung, and LJ gathered around me. It seemed they had all listened to the song before as their expressions showed they weren't dying to see it, but the expectations in their faces were clear.

I waited after preparing myself. Even if it wasn't the song I was thinking of, I couldn't show any traces of disappointment.

Lee Taehee clicked her mouse a few times.

Sound began to flow out from the speakers.

The song currently didn't have any lyrics and only Lee Taehee's sweet humming was heard. The other members hummed along with it while bobbing their heads. The moment the clear sounding music and the music I heard in the future overlapped, shivers went down my spine.

This was it. There was no doubt.

This was the song I heard in the future.

Neptune's first hit track, the song that took first place in music broadcasts, and the song which one thought of first when thinking of Neptune was precisely this song.

The moment the song ended, I began to rack my brains.

What to do now?

We already had Simon Lee's song in our hands. There was no way I could propose we use Lee Taehee's song over his without a proper reason.

As it was a great song that the traitor had spent a lot of effort getting.

If I was in his place and my colleague turned down the song I spent a lot of effort getting, I would swear a ton. He would be considered a son of a bitch unmatched under the heavens.

On top of that, there was no doubt that our relationship with Simon Lee, who gave us the song, would become uncomfortable.

How about we pushed Simon Lee's song and Lee Taehee's song as double title tracks?

Artists these days would push for a double, even triple title tracks as long as the songs were good. If we shot music videos for both songs and promoted them equally, and while it might split the public's interest in the songs and end with lackluster results if done badly, if done well, both songs could get good results.

There were real-life, successful cases where multiple songs had entered the top ranks.

If we did that, there was a high chance that Lee Taehee's song could get first place in music broadcasts as expected, and if Simon Lee's song also received good reactions, it would be better for us. It was like getting another oar when you needed to row intensely on a boat.

While I was lost in thought, Im Seoyoung, who had come to her senses after getting caught up in the song, suddenly said,

"It's better than when I listened to it before. Why don't you put this in the album?"

"I know, right? Besides the title track, there will still be four additional songs."

LJ seconded.

I also asked the question that had been on my mind.

"Yeah, it sounds good to me too. Why didn't you reveal it when

we were collecting songs? Didn't you make it with the goal of putting in the album?"

"I was planning to..."

Lee Taehee suddenly scratched the back of her head. Her complexion became gloomy. I even saw an illusion of miniature dark clouds hovering over her head. I was taken aback as this was my first seeing Lee Taehee like this. While getting heavily rained on by the illusionary dark clouds, Lee Taehee replied,

"I'm not happy with it."

"What?"

"There's something I'm not happy with about it, but I can't figure out what it is."

I didn't expect this sort of answer.

I spent all night thinking about it and went to work with a fried brain.

Just yesterday, I had felt like I could fly with the success of the drama, but today felt like I was going around with a bowling ball in place of my head. It was damn heavy.

I found the song I was looking for, but it wasn't finished yet.

Although I did tell her to hurry up and finish it, I couldn't be certain she could complete it before it was too late. As this was a creative work, it wasn't like someone could finish it for her.

I had thought about it for a long time, wondering what was different from this song and the song I listened to in the future, but I couldn't figure it out. My rotten memory. If I could listen to it once more, I could figure out what part Lee Taehee wasn't happy with.

Where did the gears become misaligned?

I thought it was most likely one out of the two.

Either, because I changed the present, the release of Neptune's album was pushed forward, or the hardships they endured from Lee Songha's controversies and other related events had an effect.

In the original future, Neptune did appear on Next K-Star as well, and thinking that they would probably rush to release a new album before their accumulated popularity crumbled like a sand castle, I felt that the latter was most probable.

I felt like I was about to go crazy.

This was something a lot of people were involved with and were preparing for, so I couldn't suddenly push the album back.

How about I let Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader listen to the unfinished song and try to persuade them afterwards? If those two liked it, then we might be able to wait a little longer for the song to be finished and release it as one of the double title tracks…

While I was thinking about this, a spoon moved side to side in front of me.

When I looked up, I saw the traitor.

“The food’s here.”

“Ah.”

Unknown when it came out, an oyster gukbap, topped with plump oysters and a plentiful amount of chives, was steaming on top of the table. My hungry stomach rumbled as soon as I saw it. We didn’t have a lunch schedule for a change and had gone to a restaurant in front of the company. I came to my senses and quickly picked up my spoon.

‘Gukbap’ is a soup with rice added in it. ‘Guk’ is soup and ‘bap’ is rice.

After a few spoonfuls, the traitor leisurely started a conversation.

“Your face looks like a corpse’s. You might even give the chief a run for his money.”

“You weren’t so different not too long ago.”

“Was I?”

“You suddenly started smoking a whole bunch and went around like a corpse.”

Looking at the traitor’s face, I continued,

“All that was to get Simon Lee’s song. You really worked hard. You’re amazing.”

This much was sincere since this was something I couldn’t help but admire.

Maybe it was because of the name ‘star songwriter’, but Simon Lee was someone who had his head held up high. If it was a song he planned on giving to a girl group at a similar standing to Seraphic on top of that, then he probably didn’t find Neptune worthwhile. How hard must it have been to persuade him?

Could I have persuaded him if it were me?

The traitor gave a smile before staring at me.

“Well, I tried to asking him and persuading him. I tried all sorts of things to try to get that song in my hands. It’s good that it worked out in the end. To be honest, if this didn’t go well... I even thought about changing teams or quitting.”

My spoon halted in mid-air.

The traitor continued,

“Since I haven’t really lost to anyone in anything, I was quite confident with work, but things didn’t go the way I thought here. My thoughts became complicated since everything you brought became a success as if you were possessed by a god or something... In the end, since I was able to do it because of that, I should be the one thanking you.”

I suddenly took notice of the traitor’s, Choi Gunyoung’s face.

The reason I had been prejudiced against Choi Gunyoung was because of the future I had seen through my foresight ability on my first day of work. The information that Choi Gunyoung lied to me and snatched the opportunity from me, and Reporter Song’s words asking if he had been like that since then.

Because of that, I had considered him as someone who might backstab me some day.

And to not let down my guard, I called him a traitor.

However, Choi Gunyoung had yet to show any traces of attempting to backstab me and had never revealed his dark intentions. Instead, he even received a song from Simon Lee through his own efforts. While I had been swept by my prejudice

and had branded Choi Gunyoung as a traitor, he had been working just as hard as me.

Choi Gunyoung smiled as he said,

“Let’s do our best from now on as well.”

I had a thought not too long ago.

That a person could change.

That the Choi Gunyoung in front of me might not be the Choi Gunyoung who backstabbed me.

Although I acknowledged the possibility, I believed I couldn’t truly trust Choi Gunyoung despite it.

However, perhaps, perhaps...

Just as I opened my mouth to reply, my vision suddenly turned black.

Chapter 65: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (3)

It was a familiar scene.

As if sand had been scattered in front of my eyes, the future I saw was a static-filled one with a bad connection. I crammed everything I saw into my head. Although I didn't clearly remember Lee Taehee's song, I didn't want to lose even a single, small detail from now on.

The sky was dark. A chilly wind cooled my sweat. I was outside. It was a groomed yard with brown grass, peppered with spots of green. I saw a wooden bench. I was sitting on that bench with my legs crossed.

I knew where I was.

I was in the outdoor smoking room on the 5th floor of the company. I knew it because it was a place I came to take a breather when no one was out here smoking.

"What are you thinking of by yourself?"

I heard a voice behind me. When I turned around, I saw the male employee from the PR team lighting a cigarette. Wearing a not-so-thick dress shirt, he put away his lighter in his cotton pants' pocket and came towards me.

A dry voice came out from my mouth.

“Just thinking about how people don’t change.”

What?

I wanted to hear more, but the PR team employee said something else as if he didn’t hear me.

“The reactions are really amazing. I never expected this sort of reaction when he pushed Lee Taehee’s song at first, but Mr. Gunyoung’s choice this time was a divine move for the album.”

Just then, my mind faltered.

I didn’t understand what he was saying.

“But that song, I heard that Mr. Sunwoo listened to it first? How did you lose the opportunity this time?”

I felt like I had been slammed into water head-first.

Then, my vision rippled once more. Like a transition in a drama, the scene changed. There was less static, but this too was, without a doubt, a future with a bad connection. I was sitting on a sofa instead of a bench. There were a short table and a dressing table with a mirror. They were familiar. It was PBS’s dressing room.

Then in front of the door of the dressing was Choi Gunyoung, leaning against the door.

He smiled as he said,

“I’m sorry I snatched it from you, but I couldn’t let the opportunity pass by.”

The next moment I was sitting in a chair in the gukbap restaurant instead of the sofa. The sounds of TV and people’s voices rushed into my ears. When I raised my head, Choi Gunyoung was looking at me with a smile.

“Why are you looking at me like that? I said let’s do our best from now on.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

I said in a voice calmer than expected.

Of course, my mind was a mess. I decided to drink a glass of cold water first. It wasn’t enough so I drank another. Only then did it feel like I could breathe. As soon as I could think properly, I recalled what I saw.

The one who pushed Lee Taehee’s song was Choi Gunyoung.

My future self said people didn’t change.

I had just thought that people could change a moment ago.

Although I couldn't know exactly what happened, I had enough pieces of the puzzle to guess. I experienced something that made me change my thoughts. Also, that probably was something related to Choi Gunyoung that made me feel a sense of betrayal.

The words Choi Gunyoung said at the end drifted in my mind.

Sorry I snatched it from you? I couldn't let the opportunity pass?

My mind had become complicated when I heard Choi Gunyoung's words previously.

The reason why everything I brought became a success, as though I was possessed by a god, was because I had a ridiculous ability. Something Choi Gunyoung didn't have.

However, the complicated unease in my heart, the bulk of which was how sorry I felt, completely washed away the moment I saw the future.

When it was about Next K-Star, he lied and backstabbed me, snatching the opportunity that was right in front of my eyes. Now, in relation to Lee Taehee's song, he chose to take the opportunity from me even though it meant acting wrongly towards me.

I was utterly at loss for words that I almost burst out laughing.

I knew it. I clearly knew it. I definitely thought this in the beginning. To be careful. That I was a fool if I was backstabbed knowingly. I almost became a fool just now. Perhaps twenty years from now, I might regret this day and say how it was this moment when I realized that life was a battle. I might have done an interview like that.

I raised my head and looked in front of me.

I saw Choi Gunyoung just a while ago, but now I didn't.

The person in front of me was simply the traitor.

People didn't change.

This fact nailed into my previously softened heart.

After going our separate ways, I walked down the street by myself. I needed time to organize my thoughts. I felt that the ash-colored sky looked foreboding, and sure enough, it started to snow. It was damn cold. My mind became colder along with it as well.

Like hell, we're going to do our best together.

I would no longer foolishly stay nervous next to a bomb I didn't know when would explode. What should I do? If I tried to find

fault with things he hadn’t even done yet, only I would look like the crazy one. But that didn’t mean I wanted to set up a trap to be backstabbed and increase my mortal enemies by one.

Especially when Son Chaeyoung, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, and the team 2 leader already wanted to hassle me.

While thinking, I suddenly recalled what the traitor had said a while ago.

He said that he was thinking about switching to a different team or quitting if things didn’t go well this time. Though, I did feel a little suspicious when he said he did all sorts of things to persuade Simon Lee.

Either way, when I thought back to what the male employee had said, although I didn’t know how Simon Lee’s song fared, there was no doubt that Lee Taehee’s song was a hit since he said the reactions were amazing.

Yeah. They say you can’t let an opportunity pass?

I took out my phone and called Kim Hyunjo.

“Chief, it’s me.”

-Yeah, what is it?

“I heard Taehee’s song yesterday, and it was really good. I think it’s almost complete and that it’ll be best if you listen to it. A song written by a member will probably solidify the image that they are a talented girl group…”

Kim Hyunjo laughed on the other side of the phone.

-Okay. This isn’t the first time with you anyways. If you think it’s good, then, of course, I need to listen to it. If it’s not bad, let’s talk about putting it in the album. Still, don’t let Taehee get her hopes up since it might not.

That probably wouldn’t happen.

I swallowed my thoughts and hung up.

Then, at night, I went to the girls’ residence carrying stuff in both hands. LJ came over to me. It seemed she had been exercising as there were beads of sweat on her forehead.

“Did you come to give Songha food again? She’s sleeping right now, should I wake her?”

“No. There’s no drama shoot today for a change, so she needs to rest on days like this.”

When I glanced at Lee Taehee’s door before turning my gaze, LJ was standing crookedly with her arms crossed, staring at me. Her blue eyes deepened slightly.

“Did something bad happen today?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. You seem a little. Let’s say you seem more like a venomous snake than a lucky one today.”

She had good senses.

“I took a blow to my soul.”

I said the truth as if it was a joke and changed the subject.

“But what are the other girls doing?”

“What do you think those addicts are doing?”

LJ said with a sour look.

“Taehee unni is pouring down beers while working on her song, and Im Seoyoung, that girl, is so busy checking whether there’s a new comment on the fan café that she even eats on her desk. From my perspective, both of them, no, including oppa, the three of you will probably be diagnosed with two or three illnesses if you went to a mental clinic.”

That was possible. I'd probably be diagnosed with distrust in humans or something like that.

"I'm fine!"

Im Seoyoung burst out from her door. After greeting me, she soon began barking at LJ. Once it became noisy outside, Lee Taehee came out as well. It seemed she really working while drinking as her long, slender eyes drooped.

I handed one of the two bags I was holding to her.

"Is it for me? How odd."

Even Im Seoyoung and LJ looked at me with suspicion. Lee Taehee halted when she looked in the bag. That was because it was filled with alcohol and snacks. There were cans of beer, bottled beer, champagne and even wine. I bought everything displayed in the store.

"Uh. Is today a drinking day or something?"

"Do you think there's a day like that? Think before you speak. Think."

The fight between the cat and dog reignited, and Lee Taehee scratched her well-brushed, brown hair as she asked,

“Really, what is all this?”

“Work on your song while drinking whatever you crave.”

She looked at me as if I was a weirdo. Well, it wasn’t an unfamiliar gaze.

“I told the chief that your song was good.”

Lee Taehee’s eyes widened at my words and her pupils shined.

“It seemed like a shame for only me to listen to it.”

“…”

Lee Taehee momentarily looked at me silently. When I glanced at the two who were still fighting, they came a step closer to me. Then, with a small cough, she asked.

“Do you really think that?”

“I do.”

“Then could you be more detailed…”

“I thought it was better than Simon Lee’s song.”

Perhaps it was because she was the leader, but she always looked relaxed and mature. Now that her eyes were wide with surprise, she looked her age. In that state, she stared at me as if seeing a one-of-a-kind weirdo in the entire world before smiling.

"I think I sort of get it."

"What?"

"What Songha felt."

The next day, I talked with Lee Taehee on the phone a few times.

Every time, I listened to Lee Taehee's song playing from the other side. To be honest, I didn't know how or where it was adjusted and it sounded the same as the song I heard from the future, but, hoping it would be of some help, I tried my best to convey my thoughts.

Tuesday morning, I received a text from Lee Taehee, putting all the time I spent worrying until my head turned dull to rest.

It said that she finished her song.

In the same room as two days ago, with the same items, and once Kim Hyunjo arrived, even the people here would be the same.

I glanced at the laptop on top of the table and placed a thin USB drive in front of me. The traitor's gaze briefly fixed onto the USB drive.

"… Taehee made it?"

"Yeah. She said she finished it yesterday."

"I can't wait."

The traitor's cheeks slightly revealed his dimples. He really smiled often. I was busy controlling my expression because I kept recalling the future I saw yesterday. It wasn't this hard when I feigned innocence in front of Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, but it seemed that the fact I couldn't have been backstabbed by the traitor twice really had an impact on me.

Soon, Kim Hyunjo opened the glass door and entered with a deeply sunken expression on his face.

"Songha doesn't have to come to work today, right?"

"No, she doesn't."

Why did he suddenly bring Songha up?

"Tell her not to be anywhere nearby. Son Chaeyoung's here right now."

"... Ah."

"She was scolding Team Leader Park, telling her to strike while the iron's hot. Looking at how her pride was reaching the sky, you'd think she's a concubine who gave birth to a son."

If it was Son Chaeyoung, it was perfectly possible.

Mermaid out of Water began yesterday night. With 11.9% national viewership ratings, it took first place against others broadcasting at the same time. They say it even peaked at 14% during the broadcast. Since it had been a long time since a drama started off with double-digit ratings, even the internet was causing a fuss.

Kim Hyunjo clicked his tongue and looked at me.

"Since Mermaid out of Water is doing so well, I don't know if the thing you talked with the CEO about last time is going to happen."

"Well, we'll have to wait and see a little longer."

Honestly, I wasn't really concerned.

In the future, Mermaid out of Water's ratings rose until its third episode before failing due to the fans of the original. That was why I wasn't concerned, but I guess people would be agitated. Don't tell

me Lee Songha saw it too?

“Yeah, you never know until the end. What’s the point in trembling in fear now?”

“Cat Guardian Ghost’s ratings will go up too.”

The traitor added while nodding. Kim Hyunjo changed the topic.

“Let’s hear Taehee’s song.”

I plugged the USB drive into the laptop. I received it when I went to their residence this morning. Although it looked like Lee Taehee pulled an all-nighter judging by her exhausted face, she didn’t have dark clouds over her head like before. She seemed incredibly satisfied.

“Let’s listen to it first and bring it up during the next meeting if it’s good. But, since we have Simon Lee’s song, everyone’s standards must have gone up. On top of that, we are doing our best to keep the quality as high as possible.”

At Kim Hyunjo’s words, the traitor replied with a smiling face,

“Still, there’s a merit if it’s her song. It’ll also be good when promoting it.”

I moved the mouse and clicked play.

Soon, music began to flow into the small room.

It didn't take long for Kim Hyunjo's eyes to turn serious and for the smile to fade from the traitor's leisurely face. Although he was quick to collect himself, I clearly saw it.

The moment his eyes frowned and irritation crossed his face.

At the same time, my lips curled upwards. It had been hard to smile nonchalantly before, but now, the muscles on my face were smiling by themselves.

As soon as the song ended, Kim Hyunjo rubbed his chin.

"This is better than I thought..."

He stood up and pointed to the USB drive.

"Can I take that?"

"Of course."

"I'll talk with Younghoon hyung first before discussing it again."

With those words, Kim Hyunjo left with quick steps.

There were now only two people remaining in the small meeting room, the traitor and myself.

As if he had never been unhappy, the traitor's eyes calmed once again. A smile returned to his lips. However, it felt different from usual.

Just as the traitor, who had been staring at me, opened his mouth, the door suddenly burst opened behind me.

I turned around thinking that Kim Hyunjo returned but instead, ruined my eyes.

Son Chaeyoung was standing there wearing the expression of a concubine who had given birth to a son like Kim Hyunjo said. Also, she was looking at me as if I was a queen who gave birth to a daughter. No, since that was a bit terrifying, the queen who gave birth to a daughter was Lee Songha and I was like her older brother.

Putting that aside, behind me was the witch and the traitor was in front.

Haha, how great. This damn company was dirtying my soul. I would have to go to my brother's house and receive some healing from the quadruplets soon.

Just as I was thinking this, Son Chaeyoung asked while brushing her long hair aside,

“I looked everywhere for you. Did you watch my drama?”

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I didn’t watch it. I don’t have any plans on watching it. Go back.

How successful would I have to be to be able to say such refreshing words to a top star?

“Ah, I saw it. It was really fun. Congratulations on ranking first in ratings amongst the programs airing at the same time.”

The traitor stood up from his seat and said in greeting.

“I am Neptune’s manager, Choi Gunyoung.”

His face was so friendly that it made anyone, whether they were young, old, male, or female, have a favorable impression of him. However, it didn’t work on Son Chaeyoung. As soon as she heard he was Neptune’s manager, her eyebrows rose.

Glancing briefly at the traitor, Son Chaeyoung looked at me and asked,

“How about you? Did you watch it?”

“No, I was too busy yesterday.”

I replied nonchalantly. Maybe it was because Son Chaeyoung straightforwardly acted as the ‘crazy bitch’ in this region, but she was easier to deal with than the traitor. Although they were pretty much the same, my mind was less complicated at the very least.

Son Chaeyoung, who had been fully prepared to boast, frowned.

“… You didn’t watch it? Why didn’t you watch it?”

“I couldn’t watch it because I was busy with my schedule, but if you ask me why I didn’t watch it, then all I can say it I was too busy to watch it…”

I said while shrugging, but Son Chaeyoung stomped her sharp heels on the floor.

“No matter how busy you are, you should have watched it! I watched Cat Guardian Ghost!”

She shouted before quickly adding in as if she had slipped up,

“Isn’t that basic manners since we work in the same company?”

Manners? For the word ‘manners’ to come out from her mouth. It sent shivers down my spine.

It seemed like she had expected me to react with a ‘Damn it! For Cat Guardian Ghost to be pushed aside by Mermaid out of Water!

For Songha to lose to Son Chaeyoung! I'm angry!' Well, that wasn't happening.

Even if I didn't know that Mermaid out of Water would flop its tail before it dried up and died, I would never reveal such a reaction in front of Son Chaeyoung. I would rather play Sse Sse Sse with the traitor.

Similar to Patty Cake

Either way, it was nice she watched Cat Guardian Ghost. Just imagining what her expression was like when she watched it made me feel refreshed as if soda was being poured into my blood vessels.

“Lee Songha, did she see it?”

“I don’t know.”

A grinding sound escaped her lips.

“Watch it today for sure.”

“We have a night shoot today as well so…”

“Watch it!”

That surprised me. The more I saw her, the more I felt the team 3 leader’s words that day were correct. Considering the way she acted, she had to have a mental illness. It looked like Son Chaeyoung was trying to pierce the floor as she stomped the ground with her heels when suddenly, the glass door burst open once more.

“Chaeyoung! Just where did you go, leaving your phone behind?! I looked everywhere for you!”

It was Chief Jo. Panting heavily, he sighed when he saw me. His face indicated he figured out what was going on with a glance.

“You said you wanted to see the CEO. Since his meeting ended just now, let’s quickly go meet him.”

When I saw Chief Jo trying his best to coax her, I suddenly recalled what I thought when I saw him for the first time. I had thought that he was someone who had saved a nation in his past life to have become Son Chaeyoung’s manager, but it was the opposite. Looking at her, there was no doubt he sold out his nation in his previous life.

It seemed meeting CEO Baek Hansung was more important than hassling me as Son Chaeyoung told me repeatedly to watch the rebroadcasts of her drama and left.

Of course, I did plan on seeing it. I planned on watching it when it started to go downhill. Since I had also thought Mermaid out of Water was a good drama looking at its synopsis before I saw the future, I thought I could learn something by seeing how a good project would fail.

“She has a really unique personality.”

The traitor grinned. His expression when he looked at me previously was a bit stiff, but it had now returned to its usual state.

I replied in my usual manner,

“Calling her personality unique is a huge understatement.”

“Well, since she started off as a child actor, she pretty much spent the majority of her life in the entertainment business. When thinking of it like that, it’s not like I can’t understand her.”

It’s not like I can’t understand her?

I couldn’t help but frown.

“Still, there are lines you shouldn’t cross. You know what Son Chaeyoung and Teacher Shim Kyungtaek did to Songha. You can’t just ‘understand’ her and gloss over the problem.”

At my words, the traitor smiled faintly and replied,

“That’s true… but, well, this industry makes people like that.”

This industry makes people like that?

His words weren’t wrong since this industry was a place where all sorts of things happened. Even I threatened someone right to his face within the first few months of working in this industry. Also, there was no telling if an incident like that wouldn’t occur again.

However, there was still a line people shouldn’t cross.

I stared directly at the traitor and said,

“Everyone who works in this industry isn’t like Son Chaeyoung. Someone like her, it might not have been the industry that made her like that but, instead, was someone like that from the start.”

After facing the traitor and Son Chaeyoung at the same time, I was confused whether I was at work or in the abode of demons.

Just when would this company be purified?

I was on my way to the office while recalling the number of Mermaid out of Water episodes that have yet to air and the date Neptune’s next album would go on sale.

“It seems you made a wrong guess?”

When I turned around, Team Leader Park was sitting in the lounge. Her face was drained of energy. Now that I thought about it, Kim Hyunjo did say Son Chaeyoung had grilled her.

“Made a wrong guess?”

When I asked, sitting down in front of her, Team Leader Park looked around, and after confirming no one was around, she said in a quiet voice,

“You said so the first day you met Son Chaeyoung. That you got a bad vibe from Mermaid out of Water. But it seems like it’ll be a big hit?”

I simply smiled wordlessly.

Team Leader Park patted my shoulder as if comforting me.

“Well, still, don’t be disappointed. Your name has definitely spread with just Cat Guardian Ghost.”

I recalled the people waiting for me at the PR team’s office last time. I had a hunch that, when Mermaid out of Water flops, the PR team employees would look at me with the same expressions as those people.

I really had to be careful with my words from now on.

I was resolving myself when Team Leader Park said with a meaningful look,

“It’s not only the employees who know you, even celebrities do. Although I can’t say who, there was someone who went to the team 3 leader, telling him he wanted to work with you.”

There was someone who wanted to work with me? Who?

When I looked at her with wide eyes, Team Leader Park smiled.

“But the team 3 leader thoroughly refused, saying that it was currently an important time for Neptune, and…”

And?

“If you are snatched by someone else, Songha might cause a fuss.”

“Songha?”

Was she being serious?

I scratched my neck while thinking about it. If I got in a situation where I had to change the celebrity I was assigned to, although I currently didn’t want to, how would Lee Songha react?

She would definitely be sad. She might even try to hold me back. Though, I would be in shock if she just said goodbye.

However, to cause a fuss in the company.

“I don’t think she will.”

“There are many cases where celebrities feel the need to possess a monopoly over people and things they consider theirs. Well, I did say that she might cause a fuss as a joke, but seeing how she acts towards you, I feel like that day might actually come?”

Monopoly?

It wasn't a word that suited Lee Songha.

When I tilted my head, Team Leader Park grinned as she said,

"Try bringing it up with Lee Songha later, and see how she reacts."

I didn't hear any news from Kim Hyunjo, who had left with the USB drive in his hands, for a while. I only heard from him while I was waiting at the Cat Guardian Ghost drama shoot.

Considering how long it took, he didn't say much. He said he played Lee Taehee's song for the team 3 leader and that they planned on discussing it with the staff, CEO Baek Hansung, and board members at the next internal meeting.

I wasn't worried since I felt it wouldn't be difficult to push Lee Taehee's song as one of the double title tracks. The fact that her song was the title track in the original future meant that it had been chosen by those people then as well.

After I called Lee Taehee, explaining the situation, Chief Lee Bongjoon, who had been sitting right next to me, warming himself in front of the campfire, poked my side. Then he gestured with his chin. When I turned around, Lee Songha was staring at me.

“Why did you come out when it’s cold? The shoot of the scene ahead of yours is continuously being delayed, so we have to wait a while longer.”

Today’s outdoor shoot was at a camping ground in a dense forest. Perhaps it was because we were in a forest, but the temperature felt like it kept dropping. We were lucky to have a campfire, if we didn’t even have this, we would freeze.

“Come here.”

When I gestured to her with my hands, Lee Songha trudged her way towards me before sitting down next to me. Even though the distance from the parked car to here wasn’t far, since her cheeks had paled due to the cold, I handed her the two hot packs I had in my hands.

“Here, put one in each pocket. They are quite warm even though they are small.”

Her small, white hands held the hot packs. Then, following my words, she put one in each of her pockets. It seemed she was fiddling with them as her pockets squirmed.

“Did you call Taehee unni just now?”

“Yeah. Her voice didn’t sound well. Well, there’s no way her body would be fine after working for two days without sleep. She’s already so thin, I wonder if she’ll be fine. I guess I should check up

on her when I take you home.”

“I think unni will be asleep by then.”

Perhaps it was due to the crackling sounds of the fire, but her voice sounded especially quiet.

“Ah, right. She probably will. It’ll be quite late.”

“Yup, it might be past 1 a.m. then.”

“I almost woke up a sleeping girl. Maybe it’s because I’m always with you until early morning, but it looks like I lost my sense of time.”

“Then when I go home and if Taehee unni isn’t sleeping, I’ll ask if she’s okay and call oppa.”

“Huh? You will?”

Lee Songha revealed a small smile as she nodded.

Not long after, they started filming Lee Songha’s scene. When I saw her acting with Seo Jijoon and other actors, Lee Songha from before had disappeared. The person standing there was Jung Haewon.

“She’s probably cold since her outfit is so thin. I hope that they finished filming this scene quickly.”

“Well, Songha almost never makes mistakes. She’ll probably finish quickly and come over.”

Chief Lee Bongjoon said while shrugging his shoulders.

That was true. Even when compared to other actors, Lee Songha made considerably fewer mistakes. On top of that, the majority of re-shoots were caused by misalignments in the scene, making Director Shin Taekyun redirect it, or the wind and other sounds muddling the audio.

While I was watching them film with happy eyes, Chief Lee Bongjoon asked,

“I’m hungry. Do you have any of Songha’s snacks left over?”

“What kind of person do you think Songha is? She’s not the type of girl who does something like have snacks left over.”

I was worried that she wasn’t eating much when she got in the role of Jung Haewon at first, but it seemed she quickly adjusted to it as she would eat a ton before filming and a ton afterwards.

“Eh, I need to start carrying food around with me too. I’m already cold and sleepy; I can’t handle this if I’m hungry as well. Winter film shoots overexert your body. You should be careful

while you're still young. You're going to be seriously sick once we finish filming a drama."

"Why don't you recruit a road manager and split the work?"

"Haaa, although I would very much to do that, I can't because of Jijoon, that guy."

Chief Lee Bongjoon grumbled while looking at Seo Jijoon who was currently acting.

"He can't stand the sight of me resting. If he doesn't see me for a moment, he'll ask where I am, what I'm doing, and where I went while leaving him behind. Sometimes I feel like I'm living with someone with delusional jealousy than a celebrity."

Well, it did seem Seo Jijoon did follow Chief Lee Bongjoon very well.

"That is also a problem itself."

"Well, it doesn't seem like this is a problem wholly unrelated to you either."

"Pardon?"

"I'm talking about Songha. It seems like she'll cause a fuss if you ever leave."

He said similar words as Team Leader Park.

“I don’t know. Team Leader Park did say something like that previously.”

“Team Leader Park did?”

“Yes. I don’t know if the person is an actor or a singer, but either way, someone went to the team 3 leader and said he wanted to work with me. Team Leader Park did tell me to bring it up with Songha…”

I was in the middle of talking when Chief Lee Bongjoon poked my side like before. Then he gestured with his chin.

When I turned around, Lee Songha was standing rigidly a few steps away.

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For a second, I was confused.

Whether she was currently Lee Songha or Jung Haewon.

Since she felt unfamiliar.

While I momentarily hesitated, her white hand covered her mouth. Then I heard her cough.

Ah, it was Lee Songha. As soon as I thought that, my mind jolted awake.

“Come here quickly.”

When I spread open a thickly padded parka, Lee Songha, who had come in front of me in a few steps, seemed to be swallowed by it when she put it on. Her face was pale. I zipped her parka up, even covering the bridge of her nose, and put the hood on.

It would be a big deal if she caught a cold.

“Are you done already?”

“No, after they film the reactions of the male and female leads, I

have to go back.”

Lee Songha shook her head and lightly grabbed my arm.

She stared directly at me. Since I had wrapped her up like gimbap, all I could see from the outside were her eyes. Every time the campfire flickered with the wind, so did Lee Songha’s eyes, which were lit by the firelight.

I feel like I said this already o.o but gimbap is a Korean ‘sushi’ roll. Very popular.

“Oppa.”

“Yeah?”

“Who was it?”

Only then did I recall the conversation I had with Chief Lee Bongjoon just now.

So she heard all of it.

I quickly replied in case she was taken aback while she still had to film.

“I don’t know either. I heard the team 3 leader refused right away.”

“Ah, but who…”

“I really don’t know. I only heard it from Team Leader Park as well.”

“Team Leader Park.”

Lee Songha mumbled while nodding her head. Although I couldn’t clearly hear her voice through the thick padding, I could clearly tell that she was trying to calm her surprise.

Her hand, which had made its way out of the parka sleeve, was still holding my clothes.

Even though she didn’t create a fuss like Chief Lee Bongjoon said I was satisfied with this.

I felt a ticklish feeling so I scratched my neck.

It would be a lie if I didn’t feel proud.

As this meant that the relationship I built up with Lee Songha all this time wasn’t frivolous. I was the same. If Lee Songha said that she wanted to change managers, I might really hit the bottle for a few days.

“Scene 37! Ms. Lee Songha, please standby once again!”

Lee Songha returned to the film set surrounded by dozens of staff and camera equipment. I focused my eyes there as well. The way she looked as she nodded and replied to Director Shin Taekyun's words were no different from normal.

Making a fuss at the company or monopoly.

As expected, they didn't suit Lee Songha.

"Songha's personality is a bit placid."

When I shrugged, Chief Lee Bongjoon placed his thick arm on my shoulder. Then he stared at me.

What were those eyes that seemed to explode with a sense of kinship?

"I don't know about that. Didn't you see the words on Songha's eyes?"

"Words?"

Chief Lee Bongjoon pointed at my left eye with his other hand.

"'Who' on her left eye."

Who?

“’Was it’ on her right.”

Who was it?

I recalled how Lee Songha’s eyes looked, but Chief Lee Bongjoon continued to speak.

“I think her eyes were clearly opened just now.”

“Pardon?”

“I feel like you just turned on the switch.”

“What do you me-”

“Cut! Ms. Songha, did you forget your lines?”

Just as I was about to ask, Director Shin Taekyun’s voice pierced my ears.

I thought I had heard wrong. She forgot her lines? Lee Songha did?

I turned my head and looked at the film set. Under the white lights, Lee Songha stood with her mouth tightly shut.

It wasn’t Jung Haewon but Lee Songha.

That day, Lee Songha constantly made mistakes. It was a first.

Just in case, I repeatedly told Lee Songha that I wouldn’t go anywhere. If I had my seal, I would have made a contract.

Koreans also use seals as a form of signature.

I wasn’t sure if it was because of it, but fortunately, she received an okay from Director Shin Taekyun in the end. The event that day was glossed over as light incident caused by an irregularity in her condition.

There was no problem afterwards.

Since Chief Lee Bongjoon said such weird things like her eyes opened or I turned on the switch, I was continuously observing her, but she was the same as usual.

She had finished Next K-Star’s past hit song cover mission well just now.

Well, the judges did give her harsh evaluations. They were like Cinderella’s stepsisters. She had reduced her sleep time to practice for this performance, and in my eyes, she did great.

Judging aside, I was already worried about how things would be edited this time as well.

The person known as the main producer of the show was someone who had already gotten a taste of using Lee Songha to raise their viewership ratings. If the judges were like stepsisters, then he was the stepmother.

After glaring at Producer Go Joontae who was wrapping things up, I turned my gaze to Neptune. They were returning their mics to the audio staff. Maybe it was due to the long recording time, but they all looked exhausted.

Since the traitor said he had something to talk with Simon Lee about, I was alone as I waited for the girls. I patted their shoulders one by one, and when I went to find Lee Songha, I suddenly frowned.

Some guy was sticking next to Lee Songha.

Even though I only saw the back of his head, I could tell who he was in an instant.

The guy who raps in Punchline. Lee Juhwan.

He was the guy who chatted about how he put dibs on Lee Songha or something to his stylists. Since I always saw his face every Next K-Star recording, I observed his behavior. He had only glanced at her in the passing until now, he never straightforwardly approached her.

When I walked towards them, I heard Lee Juhwan’s voice.

“Are you okay?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Just consider the judge’s drivel as dogs barking and forget them. I did the same.”

Lee Songha halted. I was so shocked that I looked around.

Was this guy out of his mind? There were VJs everywhere. Luckily, there wasn’t anyone filming the two as the recording ended. He could have still been picked up by the mics, yet he directly called the judges dogs?

Did he want to screw Lee Songha over along with him?

I didn’t hesitate to step between them.

“Songha, you worked hard. Let’s go.”

“Yes, oppa.”

Lee Songha stuck next to me. I heard him mumbling behind me.

“Can’t idols even flirt? So protective.”

Like hell, you were flirting.

The look Lee Songha gave him indicated that they were a million light years away from flirting. If that look was flirting, then were the eyes that she looked at her rice bowl with, lust?

It seemed I would have to have a talk with Punchline's manager.

"Songha, don't associate with him."

Songha nodded without hesitation.

That's right. What flirting? I snorted.

It looked like the other girls had already gone to the waiting room as they were nowhere in sight. I was leaving the set with Lee Songha when someone made his way through the busy staff.

A thick-skinned eyesore. It was Producer Go Joontae.

He tapped my forearm as he said,

"You don't have to worry about the judges' comments today. While editing, if we take out the unnecessary parts and keep what we need, we can definitely show it in a good light."

"Please take care of us for real this time."

Why was this guy acting so unusually?

While I greeted him, I raised my suspicion radar. Producer Go Joontae continued,

“Oh, right. I’ll make sure to tune into Cat Guardian Ghost’s broadcast. When I saw the special episode last time, the drama was very fun. Ms. Songha’s acting was amazing. If things continue like this, Next K-Star might be able to produce a top star.”

I was dumbfounded.

Although Lee Songha becoming a top star was something to celebrate, why are you trying to take credit for it, you shameless man? All Next K-Star had given Lee Songha was an armful of popularity and a pile of shit so enormous it could cover all of that.

How hard did we try to change the public opinion of her that had gone bad due to Next K-Star into something positive? And how much hardship did she have to endure?

Only my mouth smiled as I replied,

“Yes, as the project is so good, we are expecting good results as well.”

“Ah… Really?”

Producer Go Joontae opened his mouth a few times before asking,

“What kind of ratings are you expecting?”

To be honest, I was expecting over 10% ratings, but I didn’t say that.

Just in case people told me it would bring bad luck.

Since the special episode reached a peak minute rating of 6%, if we could maintain that, it would be a success considering it was on cable. The staff and related parties were predicting 8-9%.

“We are planning on a public pledge for when we hit 8-9% for now.”

Actors in Korea make pledges for when they hit a certain rating. An example would be a fan meeting or charity work when they reach X%.

“8-9%?”

Producer Go Joontae’s eyes widened before he scratched the back of his head.

Then, in a shameless tone, he said,

“You must be so busy filming these days, right? Since even Ms.

Songha, who is playing a supporting role, looks tired, Mr. Seo Jijoon from your company must be even busier since he's the lead, right?"

"... That's right."

Aha. I was curious why he was acting so unusually.

Seeing as how Seo Jijoon's name suddenly came up, I could guess what was going on his head

Although only my mouth smiled previously, this time, my entire face was smiling.

"Mr. Seo Jijoon is very busy too."

CEO Kim Pansuk of Pan Production tapped a beer bottle with his spoon.

"Cheers for Mr. Seo Jijoon!"

A cheer erupted in the Korean BBQ restaurant.

The table where the filming, lighting, and audio staff were sitting at, the table where CEO Kim Pansuk, Writer Hong Jumi, Director Shin Taekyun, as well as the actors were sitting at, and even the table the managers were sitting at, glasses of alcohol sloshed everywhere.

This was a get-together to tune into Cat Guardian Ghost's broadcast.

Since Seo Jijoon was paying, besides a few who had important schedules, everyone had gathered. Even the behind-the-scenes team was present with their cameras rolling, but everyone frantically covered their face to not be filmed. As we had come after filming an outdoor scene, everyone's appearances were a bit. If people watching didn't know, they would think this was a gathering of homeless people instead of a drama production team.

Even while they used their chopsticks, everyone kept turning their heads towards the TV on the wall. The program before us had just ended, and it was currently playing commercials.

"Should we do something when we reach a certain rating?"

Said the manager of the female lead as he swallowed a piece of beef still red inside.

Another manager joined in while creating a bomb shot.

In Korea, this is typically done with soju and beer.

"Oh, right. Mermaid out of Water is doing something like that as well. They are aiming for 20% over there."

"20%?! Wow, that's high."

As people made a commotion, the manager who brought it up shrugged.

“It’s not an impossible number. Their upwards momentum is no joke. I wonder how long it’ll keep rising for.”

Probably until the third episode.

I thought while flipping a delicious piece of beef.

“I thought that the masterpiece in the beginning of this year would be our drama.”

“Ehh? Do you know how strong the public network lineup is? Even IBC’s Time Slip reached 12% yesterday. It’s a great start considering its genre.”

“The director and writer of that project have such great teamwork.”

Yeah, they have excessively great teamwork.

Enough for a drama to flop since the director and writer got into an affair.

I cut the beef into big pieces with scissors. Its juices dripped down.

Was Lee Songha eating well?

I looked at Lee Songha who was sitting between Seo Jijoon and another lead actor. She was nodding her head as she listened to people conversing around her. Her mouth didn't rest either.

Lee Songha, whose one cheek was bulging, turned around and looked at me. Our eyes met. I smiled, telling her to eat a lot since it was expensive meat, but she looked to her left and right as she read the mood.

Then she stealthily got up with one hand holding her plate and the other holding chopsticks.

Walking towards me on her knees, Lee Songha turned to the seat next to me. Then she placed her plate in front of me. There were large pieces of beef on it.

"For me?"

"Yes."

She nodded and said in a small voice,

"Only the chief keeps eating."

I ate one of the pieces Lee Songha made a big decision to give me before piling her plate with meat. Even though Chief Lee

Bongjoon’s stare stabbed at me, I ignored him.

I need to eat until my stomach bursts. I enthusiastically placed a new batch of meat on the grill.

An associate producer shouted,

“It’s the last commercial! 1 minute before the broadcast!”

The Korean BBQ restaurant, that had been as noisy as a marketplace, became quiet in an instant.

Everyone looked at the TV with faces full of excitement and expectations.

People enjoyed the drama in various ways.

There were people whose eyes fixated on the TV as if they were at a theater and people who went online to check the real-time reactions of viewers.

What they had in common was that they all were in festive mood.

“There are tons of comments popping up in community sites and social media outlets!”

“The majority of them are positive!”

“Euah, when Seo Jijoon and Lee Songha are on the screen together, the reactions are explosive!”

Although I had read the script enough times to memorize it and seen them film the scenes, seeing the well-edited version moved me beyond expectation. The polish of the drama was good, and every time Lee Songha’s face appeared onscreen, my heart swelled with pride.

As expected, Lee Songha seemed captivated as she looked at the screen.

With a face that seemed more satisfied than when she was eating beef.

Between their heated words, the sounds of phones vibrating and ringing never ceased. Even my phone didn’t stop ringing since a while ago.

Reporter Park said that she already wrote multiple articles, and my brother and sister-in-law sent me a long message expressing their thoughts and feelings before it even ended. There were even texts from my parents, friends, and even from the PR team employees at work.

The one who sent me the most messages was Im Seoyoung.

It looked like the other girls were watching it together at home as a new message popped up every minute. The messages were about how Lee Songha was filmed yet she didn't appear onscreen and how the fans in the fan café were going crazy. There was no need for me to monitor it on my own.

Just then, the drama ended.

The Korean BBQ restaurant was packed with the sounds of twenty people chatting all at once. The waiters didn't have time to rest as they constantly brought beer over, and glasses were refilled as soon as they became empty. People became a mob, scrambling back and forth as they toasted with each other.

What silenced this commotion was a phone call.

It was a call from TVL's master control room.

Everyone, even the employees at the Korean BBQ restaurant, watched Director Shin Taekyun while he was on the phone. As he wasn't someone who easily expressed his emotions, it was difficult to guess the ratings by his expression.

Soon, Director Shin Taekyun hung up. Then he looked towards us and asked,

"Actors, at what ratings are you planning on setting your public pledges?"

Someone said 8%, another replied with a 9%.

Director Shin Taekyun smiled as he said,

“I guess we need to raise the bar.”

Chapter 68: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (6)

1st episode, average 7.9%. Peak ratings 8.3%.

2nd episode, average 8.2. Peak ratings 9.1%.

They were only a few numbers.

Yet the effect these numbers brought along was tremendous.

It was like a gust, no, a storm. Everyone I met this weekend congratulated me as they stopped me in my tracks. I even received almost a hundred text messages. I thought my fingerprints would rub off after replying to each and every one of them.

Still, I wasn't annoyed in the slightest. Instead, there was nothing more rejuvenating.

Every time I was congratulated, it felt like I was being rewarded for all the hardships I had endured up until now. It felt like my feet weren't planted on the ground but instead floating in the air. Since my heart would swell with pride all the time, there were many times when I smiled unwittingly.

On the other hand, it also felt a bit odd.

The people who didn't even look at me properly when I greeted

them multiple times, the people who half-heartedly tossed the Neptune album CD I gave them to the side, and the people who seemed to make sarcastic remarks for us to hear during Lee Songha's 'add-on' controversy.

I felt odd because it was rather these people who sent texts full of flattery.

No matter how much people was ratings and popularity was everything in this industry, their change in attitude was all too transparent.

Also, the person that dumbfounded me the most out of those people was Producer Go Joontae.

After sending me an artful text congratulating me, he suddenly asked if we could meet, which was why I was currently waiting in a coffee shop near Knet for him.

When I turned around after ordering, I halted.

There was a familiar poster posted to the left of the counter. It was a poster of the Cat Guardian Ghost cast. It seemed this coffee shop put it up as it was also an affiliate of the same enterprise as TVL and Knet.

Even among the glamorous faces, the only one that caught my eye was Lee Songha.

It was while I was staring at the poster with a happy expression for quite some time.

“Would you like one?”

When I turned around, an employee handed me my coffee. Then he smiled as if he completely understood.

“I asked because you were constantly staring at Lee Songha. After we put this poster up, there were quite a few customers asking if they could get one.”

“Really?”

“Normally, we can’t, but since we don’t have any other customers right now, I can get one for you. I too took one home because of Lee Songha. I don’t know who took the picture, it came out spectacular. No matter how many times I see it, my eyes are happy.”

I said to the chattering employee,

“She doesn’t just look good in pictures. Someone I know saw her and said she looked much more beautiful in real life.”

“Really? She’s prettier than her picture?”

“That’s why the photographer who took her picture felt

regretful.”

After bragging about Lee Songha as if I didn’t know her, I received a poster. Although I already had one at home, the more the better.

As soon as I sat on the sofa, my phone rang.

Since it was a casting call, I quickly took out my pen and notebook. Ever since the drama began doing well, the number of casting calls I received increased significantly. They weren’t anything big, and although they intended to cast Lee Songha as the focus and the other girls as extras, it was better than nothing. Compared to a few months ago, it was a change that could make one hula dance in joy.

“Yes. I will check their schedule and get back to you, Ms. Writer.”

I said in a gentle voice when the sofa in front of me moved.

His appearance cleaner than normal, Producer Go Joontae greeted me with his eyes as he sat.

As soon as I hung up, he asked as he glanced at my notebook,

“It seems there are a lot of places asking for Ms. Songha? Well, since the drama’s ratings are over 8%... I heard that its ratings are 4th in the all-time rankings for cable dramas. I heard that TVL’s

drama department are in a festive mood right now. It's not like we are strangers, I asked to see you to congratulate you on behalf of Next K-Star."

Even though he said he wanted to congratulate me, his expression was sour.

Well, his stomach must be aching quite a bit.

Although Next K-Star was also a popular program that kept surpassing its previous week's ratings, it hadn't passed 8% yet. While they had been eager for it to surpass 8%, Cat Guardian Ghost had surpassed it in two episodes.

Also, looking at the audience reactions and experienced popularity, it seemed it would go even higher.

After taking a sip of coffee, I said,

"The reactions were better than we expected so we are expectant of the future. We are even discussing changing our public pledge from 8 or 9% to 10%."

"10%?!"

Producer Go Joontae's eyes widened.

"It's because our peak ratings passed 9%. At this rate, we think

that 10% doesn't seem impossible."

Hearing my words, Producer Go Joontae looked like he had swallowed a bug. The more he did, the deeper the smile on my face became. I wondered when I had ever felt so at peace in front of him before.

I was leisurely savoring my coffee when Producer Go Joontae licked his lower lip and said,

"Umm, that's why our staff came up with this idea."

"Yes."

"They say to strike while the iron's hot. We think Cat Guardian Ghost can gain more momentum with a bit of promoting. What do you think about having Mr. Seo Jijoon appear as a special guest on the last mission, the open concert?"

This was it. What congratulations? I knew you would bring this up.

I shrugged my shoulders, saying.

"Rather than me, I think it'll be better if you contacted our PR team or Chief Lee Bongjoon..."

Of course, you would be rejected immediately.

I heard that casting requests from other directors were being rejected so there was nothing more to say about Producer Go Joontae as Team Leader Park already had her fiery glare directed at him. While I too was waiting for an opportunity to screw Producer Go Joontae over, Team Leader Park was no joke.

Producer Go Joontae licked his lips.

“Some other place had already contacted them, but they said things didn’t go well.”

“That will probably because Mr. Seo Jijoon said he wanted to solely focus on the project. The company is trying to listen to our actors’ opinions the best we can.”

At my words, Producer Go Joontae became more courteous.

“I heard Mr. Sunwoo was close with the chief in charge of Seo Jijoon.”

Oh, goody.

“Couldn’t we change Seo Jijoon’s mind if we asked through Chief Lee? It’s not like it’s difficult to show his face and cheer his company juniors on. I’ll even edit the episode incredibly.”

You almost ended Lee Songha’s image with your editing, this

guy.

Also, what have you done for me to want to cast Seo Jijoon for you?

My expression clearly showed how dumbfounded I was. As if making an excuse, Producer Go Joontae said,

“I sprinkled a bit of MSG until now because the ratings needed a little push, but I had no choice since the program had to survive for its cast to as well. I intended to take care of Neptune and Lee Songha’s image with editing before the program ended. Really.”

Monosodium glutamate (MSG), it is used as a flavor enhancer in food, despite lacking any flavor itself, and is typically used in Asian cooking.

I just wanted to smack his mouth.

If I could, I wanted to pour shit on him by the truckload.

Just as I was about to firmly reject him; a sudden thought crossed my mind.

After acting like I was considering it for a while, I nodded.

“Then I’ll bring it up with Chief Lee. Don’t get your hopes up though.”

Producer Go Joontae’s complexion brightened. Then he asked

right away,

“Will you really? Really?”

Of course, it was a lie.

Even if Seo Jijoon said he would, I wanted to hold him by his leg and tell him not to, so unless I was crazy, how could I? Only, I planned on dragging this bait for a bit longer. While I had Seo Jijoon as bait, Producer Go Joontae couldn’t use Neptune and Lee Songha as kindling for his ratings.

Well, either way, I did tell him not to get his hopes up.

“Did something good happen?”

Lee Songha asked, sitting in the passenger’s seat next to me.

As we had to talk with Team Leader Park about the public pledge, we were on our way to the company together. When I glanced next to me, Lee Songha was looking at me while munching on chocolate-coated biscuit sticks.

“Why? Does it look like something good happened?”

“Yes.”

Her reply was accompanied by a rustling sound. Then something solid poked my lips. It was a biscuit stick. While I casually received it, I felt a little strange.

Why was she trying to feed me these days?

If one of the other girls did it, I would have eaten it without any thought, but it was Lee Songha. She was a girl who even wrote her name on the ice cream container in fear someone might eat it. But she gave me pieces of beef during the first episode broadcast get-together, and even afterwards, she kept sharing things with me.

Did I look hungry?

I did become all skin and bones due to the film shoots these days.

While thinking this, I quickly replied since Lee Songha was waiting,

“It’s all because of you…”

The munching sounds paused.

“After your drama became a hit, I have been flooded with calls from people congratulating me and casting calls. This is a first. Working feels worthwhile because of you.”

Since I didn’t hear a reply, I looked towards my side and saw Lee

Songha smiling silently.

Ah. It was regretful that I was driving. I should have taken a picture.

I recalled the Cat Guardian Ghost poster I had in my bag. Even though she didn't have any makeup on right now, she was much prettier than her face on that poster. To the point it was a shame to see it by myself.

"... Oppa."

"Hmm?"

"You said that you originally wanted to be assigned to an actor."

How long has it been since I said that? Don't tell me it was bothering her still?

When I turned towards her, Lee Songha's face had turned towards the window.

"I did."

Well, to be honest, I was only okay with it because I was with Neptune. I didn't feel inclined towards being assigned to some other singer. I clearly liked actors. I liked dramas and movies. I felt this once more while going through Cat Guardian Ghost with Lee

Songha.

Although it was tough enough to make you cry, it was also just as enjoyable.

Either way, I was about to say that I was perfectly satisfied right now, but Lee Songha asked me first,

“Then you probably don’t think about it anymore?”

She continued with a quiet voice,

“Because of me.”

Lee Songha was still staring at the window. I couldn’t see what sort of expression she had due to her long, luscious hair. I looked down at her hands. Her fingers were fidgeting with the biscuit sticks a whole lot.

I smiled as I replied,

“Yeah. Because of you.”

It seemed this company had tons of log bridges.

Refers to a Korean idiom, ‘encountering one’s enemy on a log bridge’, which means to encounter your enemy at the worst place and time.

I kept meeting my enemies all the time.

I was entering the PR team's office with Lee Songha when I suddenly stood still. Son Chaeyoung and Chief Jo were talking with Team Leader Park inside.

Were they hassling Team Leader Park again?

Leaning on one leg, Son Chaeyoung said,

"Please release an interview saying that I readily voted in favor for editing the script since the viewers and the fans of the original work wanted it. If the script is edited, then I need to re-analyze it again and I might even be sent 1-2-page scripts, so I need to take as much credit for it as I can."

Mermaid out of Water had fallen into the mud.

In the future, they said that they redid the entire script, saying they would reflect on the fans of the original work's opinions, before it flopped as too many people got involved. While fireworks were going off in my mind, I heard Team Leader Park's worried voice.

"The script is good right now. I'm not sure if the staff are being too greedy,"

"If we want to surpass 20%, we have to be a little greedy, team leader."

She said, burning with desire. Team Leader Park let out a sigh as she nodded. Listening to those two talk, Chief Jo read Son Chaeyoung's expression before saying,

"It's because the production company and PBS pushed hard for it, the writer was reluctant to."

"PBS's opinion is important. Oppa, does the writer give the best performance award? PBS does."

What best performance award? What big dreams she had.

Well, they did say a drama evaluation article picked it as the worst drama.

After saying a few more words to Team Leader Park, Son Chaeyoung quickly turned around.

Then, as soon as she discovered Lee Songha and me, her expression swelled with irritation. We weren't glad to see you either. As we entered the office, I glanced at Lee Songha to see if she was okay since she did throw a cake at her the last time they met.

Luckily, she seemed to her normal calm.

Although Son Chaeyoung looked like she had a ton to say, it

seemed she was barely holding it in because Chief Jo held her back. Well, this place had too many watching eyes for her to scream and flaunt her wickedness.

Stomping on the floor as she passed by, she stopped and looked at me.

Then she said,

“I didn’t watch it, her drama.”

So what?

Wasn’t she the one who said it was basic manners to watch her drama since we all worked in the same company?

I burst into laughter when Lee Songha, who had simply been standing by, said to the back of Son Chaeyoung’s head.

“I didn’t watch yours either.”

Son Chaeyoung abruptly turned her head. Her gaze towards Lee Songha was fierce.

I quickly pulled Lee Songha’s arm and hid her behind me.

Son Chaeyoung’s shoulders heaved up and down as if she was

about to shout any moment. Chief Jo took her away after almost begging her to leave. If this place wasn't the PR team's office and if the employees were glancing at us, I felt that a season 2 of the cake throwing incident would break out.

"Did you really not see Son Chaeyoung's drama?"

When I asked Lee Songha, she covertly avoided my eyes as she told the truth,

"I did see it. With the unnies..."

"Why did you go and see her face on TV as well? Don't watch it from now on."

I said in a small voice. She quickly nodded her head.

I was thinking that I should show her when it dropped to 3% ratings when I felt someone's gaze on the back of my head. When I turned around, Team Leader Park was looking at Lee Songha and me. Her cheeks sunken after being pestered by Son Chaeyoung, she smiled.

"My heart is at peace now that you came. So are my ears."

"You had a hard time."

I sincerely consoled her.

After seating Lee Songha and me in front of her, Team Leader Park got to the point.

She said that, since we were already planning on a public pledge once we reached a certain rating, she thought about combining Lee Songha and Seo Jijoon's pledges together. Since it was difficult to control the crowd out in the streets, she asked what we thought about renting a theater and watching the episode broadcast with fans as well as holding a small fan meeting.

Lee Songha and I, well, we simply nodded our heads.

Team Leader Park took a while as she told us things to be careful of during the fan meeting and things we had to prepare for. I looked beside me while taking notes, and Lee Songha looked serious as well. After finishing what she had to say, Team Leader smiled happily.

"You'll be busier from now on. There aren't any difficulties with the two of you working together, right?"

"Nope."

Lee Songha was the first to reply. I nodded my head as well.

Team Leader Park revealed a motherly smile.

Now that we had pretty much discussed what we needed, I said my farewells and got up. But Lee Songha didn't get up right away and instead hesitated.

Then she looked up at me and said,

"I'll be down later; I have a few questions to ask Team Leader Park."

"You want to? Then I'll be waiting in the van so come down whenever."

I had wanted to go down first and turn the heater on so it was good. The inside of the van would be ice-cold because of the cold weather outside. She was barely maintaining her constantly reducing stamina with food, it would be bad if she caught a cold like this.

Leaving Lee Songha behind, I left the office.

Just as I entered the elevator, my phone in my pocket vibrated. I took it out while humming, thinking it was another casting call, but it was Kim Hyunjo. After a brief greeting, Kim Hyunjo cut straight to the point.

-Let's talk later about Taehee's song.

Chapter 69: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (7)

Did something happen?

I replied saying that I understood for now and went down to the basement. While I waited for Lee Songha with the heat turned on, I was lost in my thoughts.

After handing the song over to Kim Hyunjo, I had been thinking positively since it was a song that had been chosen as the title track in the original future. Although it might not be able to be the exclusive title track now that we had Simon Lee's song, I thought that, since there were merits to it being written by one of the members, we could push it as double title tracks.

Was there a problem?

I was already worried that there was an unexpected variable.

In the past, I had thought that, as long as I knew the future, everything would be as easy as pie. I had thought that all I needed to do was walk the path guaranteed to succeed. However, in reality, I was troubled that a variable would knock the path astray.

I was lost in thought for a long while when the door to the passenger's seat opened.

“I’m here.”

She seemed to have run all the way here as she was out of breath as she got in.

“You should have taken your time. Why did you run?”

“I thought you’d be waiting.”

“It’s only a couple minutes. Did you ask Team Leader Park what you wanted to ask?”

When I asked while starting the van, Lee Songha paused for a moment.

Then she glanced at me and asked,

“Oppa, you’re not interested in guys, right?”

Just what was she saying now?

I was at such loss for words that the worries I had about the song had gone out the window.

“What kind of interest are you talking about? First, I’m not interested in guys in THAT way.”

“Maybe you wanted to work with a male celebrity…”

She mumbled.

What’s this? Was this a continuation of our prior conversation?

I tilted my head when a light bulb suddenly went off in my head.

“You, are you asking this because someone wanted to work with me? Don’t tell me you asked Team Leader Park about this?”

Lee Songha stealthily turned her head towards the window.

So that was what she asked.

While I was taken aback on one hand, on the other hand, warmth spread in my chest.

Although it wasn’t a feeling as heavy as wanting a monopoly over me, I could still tell she was worried I might go to some other celebrity. I was proud and felt a little ticklish. I even thought that this was what the relationship between a celebrity and her manager was like.

Should I say it felt like having a companion?

My heart went beyond feeling warm and started to feel hot. It

was more effective than the heater.

"I don't have any thoughts of changing. I like working with Neptune, and I told you just now, that I'm having fun working because of you. Now really, do I need to write a contract or something?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"No."

Lee Songha quickly changed her words.

I eventually couldn't take it anymore and burst into laughter. Then I asked jokingly,

"So the person who wanted to work with me was a guy? Who was he?"

"I don't know either."

"Really?"

She tightly shut her lips again.

I had a hard time containing my laughter while we drove to her residence. Only after I dropped Lee Songha off did a few chuckles escape. However, my happy mood hit rock bottom as soon as I returned to work to meet Kim Hyunjo.

On one side of the office were Kim Hyunjo and the traitor sitting next to each other.

“I’m here, chief.”

I greeted Kim Hyunjo and lightly waved my hand at the traitor. Maybe it was because he was next to the dreary Kim Hyunjo, but the traitor’s face seemed unusually bright today.

“About Taehee’s song.”

Kim Hyunjo went straight to the point.

I had taken deep breaths in preparation for this. To be prepared for whatever variable was thrown at me.

Although I didn’t know what happened, I had to protect Lee Taehee’s song.

“It was better than we thought so Younghoon hyung and I were thinking of pushing it part of double title tracks.”

Huh? Was I worried for nothing?

Their reactions were positive enough that my nervousness was for naught.

I nodded heavily as I pushed further,

“I thought that it would be a shame to just put the song in the album as well. I think there is definitely a chance of succeeding as a double title track. Above all, if a song written by Taehee becomes a title track, it will be beneficial for her and Neptune’s image.”

“That’s right. But the situation has become a bit iffy.”

I did think things were going too smoothly.

“Gunyoung talked with Simon Lee about Neptune’s next album, and apparently, he said some very enticing words.”

Enticing words?

“It seems he has thoughts of providing support when they go on entertainment shows after their comeback.”

Support? Simon Lee will?

While I hesitated, the traitor added in with a bright smile,

“Songha’s doing well because of the drama. On top of that, Neptune’s popularity is rising as their name is being spread because of her. That’s why it seems Simon Lee thought that it could be a win-win for both sides if things went well.”

“There’s a talk show that Simon Lee is a panelist for so starting with that, he’s saying that we should appear on a few programs together. To be honest, it’s good for us.”

Kim Hyunjo continued while rubbing his chin,

“If that guy talks about stories that happened in Next K-Star, then it’ll give the girls a push and their image as a talented girl group will solidify. And if there’s someone who takes care of them in entertainment programs, it’ll be a great help to them.”

Even while my mind was complicated, I nodded my head.

If Simon Lee was actively going to help us like this, then it was a very enticing offer for us.

But why did he say Lee Taehee’s song was iffy?

As if he read my mind, Kim Hyunjo continued,

“If that’s the case, even if we go with double title tracks, Simon Lee’s song will gain much more publicity. If the public reacts, then we have no choice but to focus more on that as well. If that happens, Taehee’s song might be buried.”

“If the song is good, isn’t there a good chance it’ll do well on the charts?”

It was a song that would be known as a hit.

On top of that, the future with the bad connection I had seen not too long ago.

They said that the traitor pushed Lee Taehee’s song then. That it was a divine move. Judging from the PR team employee’s appearance, clothes and even the surrounding environment, it must have been early spring. No matter how much I thought about it, there was a good chance that the album the employee was talking about was the same as the one we were currently preparing for.

That was why it was clear Lee Taehee’s song would garner a huge reaction.

However, Kim Hyunjo was skeptical.

“How good would it be if a song became a hit because it was good? Although there are cases where songs slowly climb the charts because they are good, there are many more cases where they are buried.”

I racked my brains. Kim Hyunjo continued,

“I’m thinking about how it would be if we pushed Simon Lee’s song this time then released Taehee’s song as a follow-up or hold onto it until their next album.”

If it became a follow-up, then its release would be postponed. If it was to be put on the next album, a few months at least, it might be pushed even further back than that... There will be too many variables.

Would Lee Taehee’s song still be a hit like in the future then?

Songs were greatly affected by the trends and times when they were released. If we slipped up, our release might overlap with a famous singer, and above all, it was uncertain if their next album would be a success with just Simon Lee’s song.

“Either way, Sunwoo, you think that there’s a chance of succeeding with double title tracks, right?”

I nodded my head right away.

“Yes.”

“If it’s your senses, then I do want to trust them. How about you, Gunyoung?”

When I glanced at him, the traitor rubbed his lips as he carefully replied,

“I think it’ll be best if we push one that is certain to succeed. If our promotions are split, both might end up flat. Then Simon Lee, who actively offered to help, might not like it either.”

There was a problem with his premise. The ‘one certain to succeed’ wasn’t Simon Lee’s song.

The traitor looked at me. Our eyes met.

Having a headache, Kim Hyunjo ruffled his hair.

“Okay. Well, it’s not like Simon Lee’s song has been decided to be their title track, and there could be people who vote for Taehee’s song. Let’s try to gather opinions about what will be the best move.”

It had been a long while since I got off work early, but rather than resting, my head felt like it would explode.

I skipped dinner and was trying to anticipate the events that would occur.

My phone vibrated. It was Kim Hyunjo. I was wondering what it was now as I quickly checked, but it wasn’t about the album. Instead, it was a text telling me to call Im Seoyoung right away all of a sudden.

What was going on?

I called her as I tilted my head. She answered immediately, and I heard a noisy background.

-Oppa?!

“The chief wanted me to call you, is there something wrong? Why is it so loud?”

As soon as I asked, Im Seoyoung hurriedly replied,

-We are locked in a coffee shop!

“What?”

-We all came out to eat dinner together, but too many people gathered...!

I told her to send me the coffee shop’s address through text and got up.

It took 30 minutes to get to the location Im Seoyoung sent me by van. It was easy to find the coffee shop as there were dozens of people gathered around it.

Just what was happening?

Although the girls' popularity had gone up due to Next K-Star, it was like a bud that had only just started to sprout from dry, cracked ground. They weren't at the level of people crowding around them.

Was it because of Lee Songha?

No, no matter how successful the drama became, that was a bit...

I stopped thinking about it for now and parked the van near the café. Then I jumped into the crowd of people. The small coffee shop was packed with people as if it had a huge sale. There weren't any more seats inside so people were peering in through windows outside.

"Wow, it's so freaking lively since such pretty girls are gathered in a group."

"Should we go get their autographs? They say it's Neptune. Neptune, the girl group Lee Songha's in."

"Ah, she was a girl group?"

Seeing as I heard them say Neptune and Lee Songha within the noisy sounds, it seemed the girls were in there, but since they were tightly surrounded by people, I couldn't even catch a glimpse of their hair.

I rolled my sleeves up and squeezed in between people.

“Excuse me, coming through.”

“Ah, damn it, don’t try to cut in line!”

“I’m Neptune’s manager!”

The people who had been glaring at me gave way. After saying that I was their manager about fifteen times did I barely reach the table the girls were seated at. Oh, my god. I wasn’t that small either, but I thought I would be crushed.

When I looked at them, Lee Songha was diligently signing her autograph or scribbling or something, and the other girls were showing flustered expressions in front of the people taking pictures of them.

Im Seoyoung, who had been darting her large, round eyes, jolted up when she discovered me.

“Oppa!”

Even Lee Songha, who had been signing, abruptly raised her head. Relief brushed over Lee Taehee and LJ’s faces. I would ask just how this happened later and decided to quickly calm the situation and take them away.

First, I told them that we would only give autographs and allow pictures to those waiting inside the coffee shop. I asked for their understanding, saying that the girls had a schedule to go to, and gave everyone waiting outside a cup of coffee paid for with the company credit card. I also apologized to the café manager for this unexpected disturbance.

I didn’t know with what mind I did all that in.

I quickly organized the situation and took the girls out.

Since there were so many people tightly packed together, it was difficult even leaving the café. Creating a path for the girls and taking care of them. I felt like I was evacuating the girls from a war zone.

As this was my first time experiencing this, I was exhausted in moments. Back when we held a guerrilla concert in Hongdae, I had Kim Hyunjo, the traitor, the staff, and bodyguards.

The girls held onto my arms or shoulders, following behind me like ducklings.

I was barely able to get them in the van before quickly starting the van and leaving the place. It seemed the girls finally relaxed as they slumped down like deflated balloons. I parked the van once we were a little distance away from the coffee shop and asked,

“Just what happened?”

The first one to come to her senses was Lee Taehee, who answered,

“It had been a long time since we’d gone out so we went to celebrate the success of Songha’s drama, but we didn’t think it would end up like this. Sorry.”

“Ju-just what happened? My mind is still all over the place!”

Maybe it was because she was agitated or surprised, but Im Seoyoung said this with a reddened face.

LJ brushed her tangled hair over and criticized her,

“It’s because of you that things went out of hand. At first, there were only a few people, but once you got into position and began signing autographs, people started to crowd around us, thinking we were holding an autograph event.”

“Euaah. I didn’t think so many people would come! I went around by myself a few times to check if there was anyone who would recognize me, and back then, it ended with me giving them my autograph!”

I could vaguely picture what happened.

Since a group of eye-catchingly pretty girls went around

together, they would, of course, gain attention, and then there would be people who recognized Neptune and Lee Songha.

And then when Im Seoyoung set up an autograph event on top of that...

Those who casually came over to see them probably decided to get their autographs and pictures while they were there. It was pretty much the same as holding a small fan signing event.

It was fine since nothing serious happened, but what if there was trouble?

We couldn't easily let them go out from now on.

While I was lost in my thoughts and massaging my stiff neck, Im Seoyoung suddenly shouted,

"Oppa, Lee Songha! Lee Songha's not here! Where did she go? I think we left her there!"

My heart dropped for a moment.

I turned around to check if we really had left her behind when my heart relaxed right away. Lee Songha was sitting right next to me.

"I'm over here."

“You freaked me out! Why are you sitting in the front seat?!”

Im Seoyoung was grumpy for a while.

Then, when it looked like things had calmed down, she leaned her head to the front and started chatting again. Lee Taehee and LJ were slumped in their seats with relieved expressions, but Im Seoyoung’s eyes shined.

“Even though it was crazy, I liked it... But there were a lot of people who recognized Lee Songha. Oppa, there were many people who specifically said Lee Songha, and it felt like she signed multiple times the amount the three of us signed together.”

“Well, she does have her drama.”

“Dramas really are good. Our next album has to do well so that we can start working too. I’m scared we’ll be known as unnies who mooch off the youngest.”

Although she said it in a joking manner, her eyes were serious.

Well, when I thought back to that scene, it seemed the majority of people were gathered around Lee Songha. Since she had constantly seen this right in front of her, I thought that it was possible for her thoughts to be complicated right now.

She must have seen a lot of groups where only one or two members became famous and the rest were treated as add-ons. There were also a lot of groups that ended up disbanding because of this as well.

Their next album had to do well like Im Seoyoung's words.

Just as I was once again thinking about the album-

"Ah, an article about us was published."

LJ, who had been on her phone, suddenly said.

Im Seoyoung immediately stuck next to her.

"What? Is it about how we signed autographs in the coffee shop? There's an article about that?!"

"No, that's not it... It's about how we will be working on our next album with Simon Lee."

What?

Chapter 70: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (8)

“Let me see.”

As soon as I received the phone, I read the headline.

Although it didn’t contain specifics, it stated that the girl group Neptune connected with Simon Lee through Next K-Star and that they were anticipating what kind of comeback Neptune, a girl group that had been accumulating the image of a talented girl group, and the star songwriter Simon Lee would make.

The source of the information came from a ‘Music World of Revenge insider’.

If I knew who that bastard was I would have ripped his mouth off.

I immediately called Kim Hyunjo.

“Chief, did you see the article with Simon Lee?”

-I just saw it. Whoever that insider is, considering he said it as if it was definitive, he doesn’t seem like he’s an insider on our side. Gunyoung says that someone might have overheard Simon Lee and him talking at the Next K-Star set.

I abruptly recalled today's events as well as the look the traitor gave me.

That moment, a suspicion that the Music World of Revenge insider might be related to the traitor crossed my mind since he would want Simon Lee's song to become the title track. If he leaked this to the press first, then the company would have no choice but to consider Simon Lee's position as well.

-From what Younghoon hyung says, it seems we will hold an internal staff meeting tomorrow with the A&R team and decide as quickly as possible. If we tried to drag it on and revise the story, then Simon Lee, who has actively gotten involved, might feel weird.

Artists and Repertoire Team – Responsible for scouting talents and overseeing the development of recording artists and songwriters

Then Simon Lee's song becoming the title track was only a matter of time.

"Will this affect our double title track strategy?"

I perked my ears and looked at the rear-view mirror.

My gaze met with Lee Taehee's in the mirror. Unlike me, whose expression was stiff with anxiety, she gave me a calm look.

-I already told Younghoon hyung that you passionately pushed Taehee's song as part of double title tracks. You already have a past

record of pushing Cat Guardian Ghost and getting good results. Either way, it won't take long so just wait a little.

As soon as I hung up the phone, Im Seoyoung asked as if she'd been waiting.

"Oppa, we might go with double title tracks? You're talking about the song Taehee unni made, right?"

"It's not for certain. I'll let you know when things are decided."

I left it at that and parked the van at their residence.

Im Seoyoung and LJ rushed out, and Lee Songha, who kept giving me a worried look, seemingly finding my expression serious, said goodbye and left.

Now, only Lee Taehee remained.

"Unni, what are you doing? Aren't you coming?"

"You go first. I have something to say before I go in."

Lee Taehee said, looking in my direction. The girls revealed suspicious expression but nodded their heads without probing further. Only after the two girls dragged the slow-walking Lee Songha did Lee Taehee open her mouth.

“Sorry for today. We suddenly made work for you when you should have been resting.”

“Huh? It’s nothing. You girls must have been shocked.”

I had forgotten what had happened just a while ago because I caught up thinking about the article.

“I should have been more careful, but it seems I was caught up in the mood. It was the first time so many people recognized and approached us out on the streets as well as said that we were Neptune.”

Lee Taehee’s lips rose into a gentle smile as if she was recalling the events.

Looking back at me, Lee Taehee continued,

“I wish that people will call us Neptune for a long time. For that, the next album needs to do well. I don’t have any other desires. So if you are pushing double title tracks for me, you don’t have to.”

“What?”

“I heard what Hyunjo oppa said.”

When I looked back at her, Lee Taehee was smiling beneath the dim lights.

“I will be happy if the song I made was even put in the album. Even if it doesn’t become a title track, I won’t be so disappointed that I’ll fall into a hole of despair or become an alcoholic or anything like that.”

She said, mixing in a joke with her gentle voice.

With complicated thoughts, I replied,

“It’s not like that. To me, your song is better than Simon Lee’s.”

“... I thought that you said that simply as a compliment last time.”

Her slender eyes closed slightly.

“Thank you. For thinking of it like that.”

If I could, I wanted to tell her.

I wanted to tell her that, in the future I saw, Lee Taehee’s song was the song that represented Neptune.

If I hadn’t changed the present and, through this, the traitor didn’t bring Simon Lee’s song over, she would have encountered this future without any problems.

When I thought this, I resolved myself that I would do whatever I could to correct this path that had gone awry.

When the day brightened, I headed to work with a combatant mindset.

Then, as soon as the team 3 leader arrived at work, I stuck next to him.

If I tried to persuade staff members who I wasn't really familiar with, I felt like they would call me crazy and beat me up so I decided that completely persuading the team 3 leader was the best I could do.

There was the thing with Cat Guardian Ghost as well. If the team 3 leader thought that my senses were decent, he wouldn't completely disregard my words.

"Team leader, no matter how much I think about it, I think now's the best time to release Taehee's song. If we push double title tracks with Taehee's song, when they go on entertainment shows with Simon Lee, it can help support a more singer-songwriter, artist-like image. It'll really nail in their image as a talented girl group…"

I spilled everything I had thought of all last night. The team 3 leader, who had been listening with a tired expression for a while, waved his hand. Then he crossed his arms and said,

“Now, really. Do you really like that song that much?”

“Yes. Not just me, the other girls really like it too. Especially Songha, she said that the song felt like it was Neptune’s and that she felt she could sing it well.”

I even tried persuading him by bringing in Neptune and Lee Songha.

The team 3 leader scratched his patchy beard.

“Okay, I got it. Last time, you were obsessed with Cat Guardian Ghost, and this time, it’s Taehee’s song. I also feel like I shouldn’t ignore your words because of last time.”

“I really think it can be successful.”

“I’ll try to push for double title tracks as much as I can. But if the other staff members’ opinions are different, then there’s nothing I can do.”

I sat on a terrace from where the meeting room could be seen and stared at the meeting room door.

I kept thinking about it in my head. If the results of the meeting weren’t good, what would I have to do?

I thought of all sorts of crazy things.

Should I really act like a shaman? I even thought about telling people that I sensed that Lee Taehee's song would be a hit, very seriously. I didn't know how far rumors about me would spread, but there might be a staff member, like the team 3 leader, who felt like they shouldn't ignore my words.

I pressed hard on my temples.

I felt that I, in my current position as a manager who had only been working for a few months, was powerless. If I stood in a position where I could choose and decide on everything, I wouldn't have to agonize over this so much.

While I was still immersed in my thoughts,

"It looks like you're still thinking about Taehee's song."

I suddenly heard a voice. The traitor was sitting in the chair across from me.

My mind was already complicated, but when I saw the traitor's leisurely face, my mood hit rock bottom. Why did his face look even better than yesterday? Well, of course, it did. Due to the article published yesterday, Simon Lee's song being the title track was pretty much set in stone.

A sudden question crossed my mind.

The future where the traitor pushed and succeeded in making Lee Taehee's song a title track.

Was Lee Taehee's song part of the double title tracks in that future?

The traitor continued.

"I don't understand why you insist on pushing for double title tracks."

"Her song's good. There are a lot of singers who put out double or even triple title tracks if the songs are good."

I replied while brushed my tangled hair.

The traitor revealed a strange expression before shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know about that. I think it's better to push one that is certain to succeed. It's better to focus our energy into one. If we took a risk and it fails, then they both might end up with mediocre results."

"One that is certain to succeed?"

"I think that Simon Lee's song will become Neptune's first hit

track. Also…”

After pausing for a bit, he continued,

“I think that my senses are right this time.”

The traitor gave me a bright smile.

That moment, I had a sudden urge to wipe his face from my sight.

How long had I waited?

The door to the meeting room opened. The staff members who had attended the meeting bustled out. I shot up and approached the team 3 leader. The team 3 leader, who had been scratching the back of his neck, clicked his tongue when he saw me.

Damn it. It didn’t end well.

“Everyone agreed that Taehee’s song was good.”

The team 3 leader said while patting my shoulder.

“But an article that we were working with Simon Lee had already been published, and they asked why we should insist on dividing the public’s attention with double title tracks when we already had

a song that would be a hot topic. That's why the meeting leaned towards the opinion of putting Taehee's song on their next album. There was nothing I could do."

There was no other way using normal means.

Just as I thought that I only had crazy options left, the team 3 leader mumbled,

"Unless the CEO tells us to go with double title tracks."

"The CEO?"

When I turned my head and asked, the team 3 leader licked his lips and nodded.

"Since they say the CEO arrived not too long ago, it'll be decided once I tell him and he makes the final decision. But it'll probably end up like that. Like Blackout's album and Neptune's last album, he usually leaves it up to the staff."

CEO Baek Hansung's face crossed my mind.

Then I also recalled how he had personally called me. He had suddenly asked whether I thought Cat Guardian Ghost would do well in China. He had also said previously that he had to keep lucky people close.

Maybe, just maybe, if he saw me before he made the final decision on Neptune's next album, he might ask me for my opinion this time as well.

Also, one more thing.

I also recalled him saying that he would do something for me if Cat Guardian Ghost became successful. Since I was gnashing my teeth at Son Chaeyoung and Teacher Shim Kyungtaek that time, I had told him that I hoped Son Chaeyoung would pay the appropriate price for her deeds.

However, the current situation was more important than that.

I swallowed my saliva and said,

"Team leader. Could I come with you when you go to the CEO's office?"

"Don't tell me you want to…"

The team 3 leader glanced at me, seemingly at loss for words, before slapping my back.

"You're a troublesome guy. Have you become so daring after entering the CEO's office a few times? Is the CEO your friend? No way!"

“I’ll keep my mouth shut and simply stand behind you.”

“I said no!”

He wouldn’t budge.

The team 3 leader shook his head and disappeared towards the sixth floor by himself.

Of course, it wasn’t like I didn’t understand him. If I was him, I too would have wondered just where this crazy guy came from. However, even if it was crazy, I had no choice but to do it if it could possibly connect the present to the future I saw.

After thinking for a long while, I took out my phone.

I found the phone number I had saved previously.

It was a phone number that had called me once. It was CEO Baek Hansung’s personal number.

*

CEO Baek Hansung gazed at the synopsis on his desk with a strange look.

It was the early synopsis of Cat Guardian Ghost.

“Does this look like a drama that will be successful?”

At his question, the director who had been drinking black tea on the sofa shook his head.

“Just looking at the synopsis, it looks like a project from a newly founded production company. Well, if the script and the characters weren’t okay, I couldn’t have even suggested Jijoon do it at all. Also, to be honest, I thought that their target ratings would be 5% after reading the script.”

“Just what did he see in this?”

CEO Baek Hansung mumbled with interest.

Just then, accompanied by a knock, the team 3 leader entered the CEO’s office.

“CEO, the staff meeting regarding Neptune’s next album title track has ended just now.”

“Hmm, okay.”

“There was a lot of talk about what sort of strategy we should take with Simon Lee’s song and Lee Taehee’s song, but the opinion that we go with Simon Lee’s song as the title track this time was-”

“What was Jung Sunwoo’s opinion?”

CEO Baek Hansung abruptly asked.

The team 3 leader blinked.

“… Pardon?”

After tapping his desk a few times with his fingers, CEO Baek Hansung asked once more,

“Jung Sunwoo. I’m curious what he chose.”

Chapter 71: The Most Important Thing In This Industry, Decision-Making (9)

If someone was to ask me, “When were you the craziest?” I could reply in a heartbeat.

Right now.

I was thinking about calling CEO Baek Hansung as soon as the team 3 leader finished talking and left his office. I wanted to do whatever I could.

When I resolved myself and tightly held my phone, my phone in my hand vibrated.

It was the team 3 leader. As soon as I answered the phone, he abruptly said.

-You, come up to the CEO’s office immediately.

This was my fourth time entering the CEO’s office.

However, I was the most nervous this time. I felt like I was on tenterhooks. The blinds were closed inside the office, making the shadows come down heavily.

Although the team 3 leader and the director were present, my gaze was fixed on CEO Baek Hansung.

I felt this every time I saw him, but he was difficult to talk to.

I felt this even though he wasn't hostile or overbearing. I had never been told I was timid wherever I went, but when my eyes met with his, I felt like my energy was being sucked out of me. No, it felt like it was being crushed.

After greeting them and sitting next to the team 3 leader, CEO Baek Hansung said,

"This is the first time we've talked since the phone call last time, right?"

"Ah, yes."

My cheeks burned. The team 3 leader was giving me a strange look from the side. His face seemed to ask if I had talked with the CEO on the phone.

"You guessed well that time."

CEO Baek Hansung said with an odd smile.

The director added,

"Yeah, you really did choose well. Although Mermaid out of Water is sweeping through the drama charts in China right now,

Cat Guardian Ghost is slowly crawling its way up, spreading through word of mouth.”

The director gave me a few more pieces of information while drinking tea. They were all good news. They really were great news, but while I nodded my head and reacted to his words, a different thought kept making its way in my mind.

Just as I glanced at CEO Baek Hansung to look for an opportunity, he suddenly went straight to the point.

“I heard you wanted to go for double title tracks for Neptune’s next album?”

He stared at me and asked again,

“I heard you passionately pushed the song a member made?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

That was because it was a song that was almost guaranteed success.

There was no way I could say that. I brought out what I had prepared to persuade the team 3 leader again.

When I looked at CEO Baek Hansung when I finished talking, he was still looking at me. However, his expression was different. He had previously been smiling pleasantly, but now, he was calm.

As if he found this boring.

Since his appearance was completely different from when he was smiling, my shoulders and waist unwittingly stiffened.

He tilted his head.

“Hmm. And?”

What do you mean ‘and’?

When I had already told you everything I could?

“Any other reason?”

“Pardon?”

“I understand what you mean, but that’s something anyone can say. I somehow feel like you have another reason why you are pushing that song. Am I wrong?”

A chill went down the back of my neck.

CEO Baek Hansung leaned forward. His eyes were still fixated on me, seemingly observing me. It felt as though he was reading my mind.

I swallowed dryly. I myself wanted to know what this person was thinking. Don't tell me he truly thinks I have some supernatural ability?

Of course, I had acted suspiciously a few times, but they were acts that could be glossed over with having good luck, senses, or a discerning eye.

Even the employees who had looked for me previously had come with the thought of simply asking since they were curious. To them, it was like going to a 3000-won tarot stall on the streets.

Approximately 2.66 USD.

Although I wasn't sure what the 'other reason' CEO Baek Hansung was thinking of was, I would never tell him the truth. It would be a problem if he believed me and a problem if he didn't.

"There are no other reasons besides the reasons I've told you."

"There aren't any?"

"Yes. There aren't."

Damn it. If my persuasion didn't work, should I bring up the option I had due to the Son Chaeyoung incident last time again...

“Then that’s fine.”

What?

“Let’s go with double title tracks for this album.”

It felt like a taut string had suddenly become loose. My mind, which had been churning furiously, became blank as my head jolted up.

What was this?

It wasn’t only me who was surprised, even the team 3 leader, who had been looking at me as though I was a child walking on thin ice, widened his eyes. The director was also taken aback.

The only one who kept his composure was CEO Baek Hansung.

With a serious voice, he said,

“I’ll trust you once more.”

Kim Hyunjo and the traitor seemed to be at loss for words.

After opening and closing his mouth a few times, Kim Hyunjo finally spoke.

“I’ll trust you? The CEO said that?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

The team 3 leader said, astonished, as he looked at me.

“Lucky Charm here casually said everything he wanted to say in front of the CEO and the director. Now, really, I don’t know where he got his confidence from but he didn’t look even a bit nervous.”

It was completely nerve-wracking though.

“Hyunjo, are kids these days all like him? The spirit of the rookie, or something like that?”

“He’s just crazy. I only got to look around the sixth floor after working for over a year. Gunyoung, have you talked with the CEO before?”

“… No.”

“Yeah, this is normal.”

I secretly calmed my heart amidst their heated looks.

To be honest, CEO Baek Hansung’s face still lingered in my head.

His voice that simply said to go with double title tracks...

I had spent all night agonizing over it, and even when I stuck next to the team 3 leader to try and persuade him, I was still pulling my hair as things weren't going my way, yet it all reversed with CEO Baek Hansung's words.

When would I be able to climb up to that level?

Just when?

When I looked up, the top looked distant, but I was relieved right now. It felt like something that had been heavily bearing down on me had dropped since, in the end, the train, that had broken away from the rails and had been rushing into a fog, had now returned to its original path.

A smile of relief hung on my lips.

"Don't smile, you crazy guy."

With a dumbfounded expression, Kim Hyunjo shook his head.

The team 3 leader said,

"Lucky Charm, you should directly tell Taehee the news since this is the same as you grabbing what shouldn't have happened by

the collar and lifting it up.”

“Yes, understood.”

“Hey, but how…”

The team 3 leader scratched the back of his disheveled hair before cautiously saying,

“How can you push for such things so confidently? What are you going to do if it fails?”

“Then he’s screwed.”

Kim Hyunjo said while gesturing a sword striking his neck with his hand before patting my shoulder.

“Well, if you get fired, I’ll introduce you to other companies. Since you now have 3 months of experience, you should be able to get a job.”

He was being serious. 100% serious!

Shaking his head side to side, Kim Hyunjo left with the team 3 leader. Now only the traitor and I remained.

“Hey.”

The traitor said,

“Do you have something with Taehee?”

“What?”

Just what nonsense was this now?

“It looked like you would focus on the acting side, and I thought that the production of their album was beyond pretty much outside your-Ah, sorry.”

He grimaced slightly before correcting himself.

“You didn’t look like you were interested in it. Instead, this was my area of interest. That’s why I can’t understand why you are pushing so hard at all. Like the team leader said, all the contributions you accumulated until now might fade if this fails. Well, that’s why I thought there might be something up with you and Taehee.”

“What would there be? Taehee’s song was good, and that’s why I felt it was a waste to miss this opportunity. If it’s like this, is there something between you and Simon Lee?”

“… No way there is.”

At my joking words, the traitor smiled as he shook his head.

I felt this when I talked with him before, but it seemed like he was confident Simon Lee's song would be a hit. Which was why he wanted to push for an exclusive title track. But why did he push for Taehee's song in the future?

Was it because he secretly liked her song better?

Or maybe he felt unpleasant that this song was in my hands?

The traitor said,

"If it's like this, then it's like we brought a song each."

"I guess."

"Although what's important is for any of the two songs to do well and make this album a success, still, do you want to make a small bet since things turned out this way?"

To others, this might seem like a normal conversation. However, I could see it with my eyes. The bridge that connected the two of us was splitting apart and collapsing. It looked like it would break apart any moment.

I readily nodded my head.

“A bet seems nice.”

That night, I told Lee Taehee the news in front of her residence door.

Lee Taehee was at loss for words for a while then showed off a perplexed expression that I was seeing for the first time. Since she asked a few more times, seemingly in disbelief, I too answered her slowly every time.

“Title…”

She tried her best to control her expression before glancing towards the living room.

The other girls were looking in our direction as if they were dying to hear what we were talking about. The only one who was calm was Lee Songha… Or so I thought, but only her body was still while her head and neck gradually leaned closer towards us like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

“One second.”

Lee Taehee came out and closed the door.

When she shut the door, it looked like there were earthquakes going off in Lee Songha’s eyes.

“It’s really a title track?”

“Yeah, there’ll be double title tracks. You’re going to be busier now that you have to record and mix.”

“Oh, my god.”

Lee Taehee covered her face with one hand. What would that do when your ears were red and your lips were wriggling beneath your hand? Although I expected her to be happy, her reaction was bigger than I had thought.

Haha. It was worth going around like a crazy person.

Calming her excitement after a few minutes, Lee Taehee said,

“Thank you for constantly taking care of me. From now on, I’ll-“

“No need to thank me.”

“Practice hard like a dog.”

What?”

“No, don’t do that.”

You already had more than enough practice time. Was she

thinking of performing their comeback on an IV?

"Anyways, tell the girls as well."

I said while glancing at my wristwatch when Lee Taehee suddenly held onto me.

"Have a beer before you go. There are still a few left from what you bought last time."

"Huh? There are only you girls and without the chief or Gunyoung, that's a bit..."

"It'll be a secret."

Lee Taehee made a 'zipping her lips' gesture.

I thought about it while my arm was being held onto.

First, I had stayed up all night yesterday.

As I used up a lot of my mental energy today due to various reasons, my shoulders felt stiff. There also was a schedule I had to take Lee Songha to early tomorrow.

My reasoning told me to stop thinking about drinking and to go home and sleep, yet my body simply nodded its head and entered

their residence.

After that, well.

After drinking and toasting with the girls until early morning, I took a short nap in the van parked in front of their residence.

Then, for the first time in my life, I had sleep paralysis.

I realized the reason why when I woke up. There was something heavy on top of me. The thick parka Lee Songha wore on every film set, a microfiber blanket, as well as another blanket, covered me in three layers.

It looked like someone put them on me so that I didn’t freeze to death, but I was lucky I didn’t die of suffocation.

Either way, we all agreed to keep this a secret from Kim Hyunjo.

If he knew, he’d kill me.

Once the title tracks were determined, the album production sped up.

When audio recording was added to the already busy schedule of Next K-Star and Cat Guardian Ghost film shoots, each passing day felt like an hour. However, even though my body was exhausted, I could endure it since my efforts weren’t for naught.

“Looking at the progress of our ratings, it’s only a matter of time before it reaches 10%.”

Chief Lee Bongjoon said while yawning.

Infected, I too yawned as I replied,

“Looks like it. The PR Team is already preparing our viewership ratings pledge.”

The third episode, which aired two days ago, and the fourth consecutively beat our previous peak ratings. Those involved were focused on how much higher it would go beyond 10%. Food trucks, presents, and food continuously arrived on film sets. Because of them, the Cat Guardian Ghost team was always in a festive mood.

“They both are sleeping well. Poor things.”

Chief Lee Bongjoon clicked his tongue as he looked to his side.

With earphones on, Seo Jijoon had buried himself on the sofa and was sleeping. Of course, Lee Songha was nodding off next to me while holding onto my coat. I didn’t know what kind of dream she was having but she tightly held onto my coat.

Since the film shoot started early in the morning and ended at night, I wanted to head straight home and lie down on my bed, but

we still had a schedule left. Apparently, they were producing a short video of New Year's greetings from W&U celebrities. This was why we had come back to work and were waiting for the film crew in a break room.

Although Neptune had already done it, they scheduled an additional one for Songha to air on PBS. Well, this meant that Neptune wasn't at the level of giving New Year's greetings on public networks yet.

To be honest, it was only possible for Lee Songha to make a greeting alongside Seo Jijoon because their currently airing drama was trending right now. She was still considered a rookie.

"Right, are there any commercial offers coming in for Songha?"

"Although it's not certain yet, we are in the talks with some."

I was already awaiting it. Once things were confirmed, it would probably be Lee Songha's first commercial.

"I heard that there were a ton of offers for Jijoon."

I heard that he was almost sweeping them up. I felt that, once Cat Guardian Ghost ended, I would see Seo Jijoon's face all the time on TV for a while. Since this role suited him like well-fitted clothes, his acting spectrum and fandom had increased drastically.

When he heard me, Seo Jijoon opened one eye.

“To be honest, I wanted to repay you somehow since this was all due to you. I’ll repay with my body. Do you need me for anything?”

When a terrifyingly good-looking person said so in such a polite manner, it was even more spine-chilling.

Do I need him for anything…?

While I thinking, Seo Jijoon asked again,

“What about the program that Neptune’s on, Next K-Star or something? I heard I received a casting call from them, should I go on there?”

“No.”

So who can be happy?

“It’s good if you don’t associate with that program.”

When I replied seriously, Chief Lee Bongjoon, who knew my situation, giggled.

After the event last time, Producer Go Joontae’s acts of using Lee Songha as kindling for ratings had stopped. What a detestable man. He stuck next to me and tried to persuade me during every

recording session, but I kept dragging it on.

'We're still discussing it, he's thinking about it, I'm trying to persuade him.'

I kept talking in circles. This was what I learned the most while working. In any case, every time I saw Producer Go Joontae suppressing his temper, I felt refreshed. Should I say he became somewhat of an energy drink for me?

Recently, I began happily thinking about the best way to tell him that I tried to persuade him but that it didn't work out in the end so that he would burst into a fit of rage.

But to add Seo Jijoon in there? Never.

"Then next time. I'll repay you."

Just as Seo Jijoon said this while shrugging his shoulders, the break room door opened.

I shook Lee Songha awake thinking it was the film crew, but the people who entered were those who I didn't want to associate with as much as Producer Go Joontae.

The crazy bitch of this region, plus one.

Son Chaeyoung and Chief Jo.

“What the?”

As soon as she saw us, Son Chaeyoung glared at us. Her gaze seemed to stab at Seo Jijoon, Lee Songha and me.

It felt like the time she glared at me was especially long.

Lee Songha, absentminded since she had just awoken, fumbled around before grabbing the gummy bears she had been eating before. If Son Chaeyoung charged at us again, it seemed she would throw the jellies at least.

Of course, I had no thoughts on stopping her. She needed to grow up strong.

“I’m going crazy. Oppa, how did you set my schedule?”

While throwing a fit at Chief Jo, Son Chaeyoung clenched the paper in her hand.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a short 1-2-page script.

Last week, Mermaid out of Water’s rating had continuously shot up until their third episode. They maintained their ratings on their fourth. Perhaps it was because of this, but Son Chaeyoung’s complexion was lively like a poisonous flower in full bloom even though she had been suffering from the short, rewritten scripts.

Her temper was lively as well.

"Don't you know that I can't do anything if something's bothering me?"

"Yeah, Chaeyoung. Since the drama filming schedules have been all over the place, things might have... We can go as soon as you do a 30-second greeting."

"I have to spend all night memorizing the script after this, but do you think I'll be able to like this? When the top 3 people I consider eyesores are gathered in front of me?"

Who was first?

I seemed to be sleep deprived since that was what I was curious about in this situation.

"Who's first?"

Instead, it was Seo Jijoon who asked while shaking one of his crossed legs up and down.

Son Chaeyoung snorted.

"Why? Do you want to be first?"

“If it’s a ranking of people who you consider an eyesore, then, of course, I want to be first.”

After a few exchanges, they began to bicker more severely. I did hear that they didn’t have a good relationship. Well, I did wonder who else would be on friendly terms with Son Chaeyoung besides Teacher Shim Kyungtaek.

While the two fought each other, Chief Lee Bongjoon didn’t seem to have any thoughts on stopping them. Chief Jo looked pitiful, nervously trying to stop them by himself. I remained a spectator, and Lee Songha snacked on jellies instead of popcorn as she watched.

“Chaeyoung. Chaeyoung. The broadcast, your drama began airing.”

“What? When?”

Just then, Chief Jo was successful in gaining Son Chaeyoung’s attention.

Since it was 10:15 pm right now, the fifth episode of Mermaid out of Water started 15 minutes ago.

It seemed she had forgotten her bickering with Seo Jijoon as Son Chaeyoung grumbled about how he didn’t tell her sooner.

Then she sat on the sofa in front of us, crossing her legs.

“Put the episode on your phone.”

“Uh, one sec.”

Chief Jo tapped his phone with his thick fingers.

During this time, Son Chaeyoung raised her chin as she looked at us. Her eyes narrowed and her lips curved upwards in a slant. It was a familiar expression. Ah, it was the expression the quadruplets would make when they wanted to brag about something.

Damn it, how could I have recalled the quadruplets while looking at Son Chaeyoung?

“I don’t know if you guys saw the progress of my drama’s ratings?”

Son Chaeyoung said in a passing tone.

“I didn’t.”

“I didn’t see it.”

“Why would I watch that? I’m already busy checking mine.”

“Me too.”

Seo Jijoon and Lee Songha replied one after each other.

“Who asked you? I didn’t check your ratings either!”

Snorting, Son Chaeyoung asked again.

“Did you see it?”

At me.

Why was this woman acting like this towards me since last time? For some reason, I thought that the first on her ranking of eyesores was me. It was the same for me as well.

Although I was checking Mermaid out of Water’s ratings every time, I acted as though I didn’t and shook my head. Chief Jo mouthed that I reply that I saw it, but I didn’t see him. I didn’t.

“I didn’t see it either.”

“Really?”

I thought she would shout like last time, but she was unexpectedly calm.

Instead, Son Chaeyoung even crossed her arms and smiled.

“Well, not looking at it will be good for your mental health. When the difference is so large, you’d only feel sad if you saw it. Since we reached 15% in metropolitan areas in four episodes, we’ll definitely hit 20% at this rate. There’s already more than 5% difference from the cat or rat thing so it’s obvious what will happen in the future.”

Then she started talking for a long while about things we never asked like how the times when 10% on cable being equal to multiple times that of public networks had passed, that there weren’t any TVs not connected to cable these days, and that we had to consider cable and public networks on the same level.

But you said that you didn’t know Cat Guardian Ghost’s ratings.

I made a dumbfounded expression, and as if just remembering, Son Chaeyoung swiftly turned to Chief Jo.

“Oppa, what are you doing? Aren’t you going to give it to me?!”

“No, um, Chaeyoung. Let’s watch this after we film your greeting.”

Chief Jo, who had been looking at his phone, stuttered.

“Why? Since we were hastily filming the adjusted parts, I didn’t have time to properly monitor it on set. I have to check it.”

“Uh, but I think it’ll be good if you watched it from start to finish after this episode airs.”

“That’s why I’m asking, why?! Is there a problem? Was my scene cut out?!”

“No, that’s not it. The viewers’ reactions right now are a bit…”

Chief Jo’s face was pale as if he was watching a horror movie. As if trying to not show his phone to Son Chaeyoung at all costs, he slowly backed away.

Ah, I had a strong intuition.

Finally.

Mermaid out of Water finally slipped up.

Chapter 72: A Historic Drama For Various Reasons (1)

Was it time to turn on the music? Was it?

I took out my phone and searched Mermaid out of Water. Lee Songha leaned her still drowsy face in to see as well.

Comments regarding Mermaid out of Water were pouring onto portal sites, social media, and fan sites for the drama. Due to the fans of the original work, the drama had been quite a hot topic until now, but it had never been this heated before. And only 15 minutes into the broadcast to boot.

It was clear that today's broadcast really rubbed their viewers the wrong way when looking the occasional comments asking if the writer had gone crazy or if the director had lost his mind.

Seo Jijoon, whose head was next to Chief Lee Bongjoon's as he looked at his phone, ridiculed,

"Hey, you kept going on and on about real-time search rankings, but it looks like your drama will reach the rankings before the broadcast ends."

"What?"

Son Chaeyoung frowned.

“Oppa, phone…! Never mind, I don’t need it. Where did I put my phone?”

When Chief Jo hesitated, Son Chaeyoung looked through her coat pockets and purse. Then she found her phone, which had a photo from her photo shoot printed on its case.

Chief Jo was so antsy that it seemed as though Son Chaeyoung was holding on a bomb rather than her phone as he looked around.

“Just what happened…”

She mumbled as she tapped her fingers before closing her mouth at some point.

Her eyes widened and her gaze fixated on her screen.

“What is this? What happened for people to cause such a mess like this?”

“First… First, I’ll call the director.”

“After we check the broadcast! I need to see just how he pasted things together for people to be like this!”

After flipping out at him, Son Chaeyoung stopped. With irritated eyes, she gave us a sideward glance. Soon Son Chaeyoung stretched

her hand out to Chief Jo.

“Give me your earphones.”

“Chaeyoung, calm do-“

“Give me your earphones!”

This was it. It was about time she burst.

Unable to endure her scream which pierced his eardrums, Chief Jo gave her his earphones as if offering them up to her. After plugging the earphones in her ears, Son Chaeyoung focused on her phone screen.

I thought about watching it on DMB but decided not to.

Digital Multimedia Broadcasting – Think of it as TV on your phone.

I felt that watching Son Chaeyoung would be more fun than the actual broadcast.

Her face, which had been lively just moments ago, now looked terrible. On the other hand, I felt like fresh sprouts had budded and were tap dancing in my heart.

Ah, what a wonderfully refreshing feeling.

Mermaid out of Water's fall would gain momentum like a fast-flowing stream. Although it was sad for those involved in Mermaid out of Water, I was extremely excited. I was as excited as I would be on the day a blockbuster sequel I had waited 2 years for finally opened in theaters.

It seemed my feelings towards Son Chaeyoung ran quite deep. Well, I had been suppressing them since the day I heard Son Chaeyoung mock me by saying, 'So, until then, don't piss someone off with something like this. It seems you don't know because it hasn't been long since you've started working, but this industry is always like this,' to my face.

Curious about how Lee Songha, the victim, was handling this, I looked to my side. She was simply eating her jellies with a calm expression. Those who didn't know her might admire her, thinking that she maintained a cool head in this situation, but she was different from usual.

She was eating especially happily.

"Is it tasty?"

"Yes. It's yummy,"

She whispered after decimating the five gummy bears she popped in her mouth. Then she placed a few in my hand as well. While happily eating jellies, I watched Son Chaeyoung's distorted face gradually become more dreadful.

“What the? To suddenly… Ah, what was the director thinking…?”

“Chaeyoung, please calm-“

“Calm down? Do I look like I can calm down?! When he pasted the scenes that I was barely able to act with the scraps of 1-2-page scripts like this? If he was going to be like this, then why bother re-filming?!”

Ah, I had to share this happiness.

I wanted to show her face to Neptune, Kim Hyunjo, and the team 3 leader, but what a shame. If I took a recording, it probably wouldn’t end with a slap on my cheek, right? Did the break room not have any security cameras?

I looked up at the ceiling when there was a knock on the door.

“Hello!”

A man wearing a baseball cap backwards entered the room. Behind him came other staff members holding a heavy ENG camera and lighting equipment. It was a film crew from PBS.

Their timing was amazing.

The producer was quick to read the mood. It seemed he had

immediately realized that the mood in the break room was unusual. He quickly took off his hat and bowed his head.

“Ah, I’m sorry that we were late after asking such busy people to gather!”

He said, gently making excuses about how the traffic was slow and such. It seemed like he had mistakenly believed that the frightening mood was because the film crew was late. Since he acted so humble, perhaps because of Seo Jijoon and Son Chaeyoung’s value, Chief Lee Bongjoon got off his heavy butt and settled the mood.

During this time, the raging sense of ‘a calm before the storm’ subsided.

Seo Jijoon, who had been snickering while looking at his phone, and even Son Chaeyoung, who cursed the director so much that it seemed she would stab a stake into a voodoo doll, had, at some point, put on calm facades. Of the three, the only one who was showing her true face was Lee Songha.

After sharing light greetings and finishing preparations for the shoot, the producer said in an amiable tone,

“We’ll film a sketch for the beginning before the greetings. You just need to talk to each other naturally like normal. There won’t be any audio recorded.”

Like normal, talk to each other naturally.

Then it would 100% be unsuitable for TV.

Would it be fine since they weren't recording audio? I glanced at Chief Lee Bongjoon, and he told me not to worry and yawned.

Son Chaeyoung was the first to talk calmly.

"You know the saying 'Take a step back to take two steps forward'. It's like that."

She looked at both Lee Songha and Seo Jijoon before continuing,

"There's no need to worry since the director and writer are both trustworthy people. They'll quickly get back on track. There's no need to suddenly become sad."

It was you who had been sad just a moment ago.

I looked at Son Chaeyoung, astonished. The Son Chaeyoung I knew before I began to work here was sitting there. The symbol of innocence. There was a smile on her lips, and her gentle voice put narrators to shame. I almost wondered whether this woman was the same person who had been cursing the director with ignited eyes not long ago.

Son Chaeyoung brushed her long hair aside and added,

“This is pretty common in the drama industry.”

“Yeah, I hope there isn’t an impact to your ratings.”

Seo Jijoon said, smiling. It wasn’t the ridiculing smile from before but one that felt sincere. I was inadvertently amazed.

If I were to translate it, I felt that it would be something like ‘Since this is normal, don’t try to get on my nerves by talking nonsense,’ ‘Did I say anything? But do you think you’ll be able to even maintain your current ratings, let alone hit 20%?’ From the outside, it looked like small talk between fellow celebrities living under the same roof.

Luckily, Seo Jijoon brought up the topic of drama shoots with Lee Songha so she was able to naturally mix in with their conversation. The scene reflected through the camera was frighteningly friendly.

“See, there’s no need to worry, right?”

Chief Lee Bongjoon snickered as he poked my side.

“Yes.”

“Of course, the two of them are pros.”

“I’m worried about Songha. I don’t think she’s very good acting coy like that.”

She didn’t express her emotions or talk much, and there were many times when she spoke bluntly. I didn’t know whether she could mix in with them like that, especially with someone like Son Chaeyoung. Also, the other girls wouldn’t be able to help her when she was out on her personal schedule.

I didn’t know if I was worrying needlessly, but I was worried.

After letting out a sigh, Chief Lee Bongjoon mumbled from the side,

“I don’t know about that. I think she has a knack for it when looking at how she acts towards you.”

“Towards me?”

“Well, to me, it doesn’t look like you should be worried.”

After making speculations, he said that he wanted coffee from the vending machine since he was so tired and left. Chief Jo had already left, saying that he was going to call the director of Mermaid out of Water, so I was the only manager remaining.

I watched the shoot with my arms crossed, but someone came up next to me and whispered,

“The celebrities of W&U are very close with one another.”

“Pardon?”

I turned around to see who was speaking such nonsense, and it was a young man.

The man, who introduced himself as the floor director, prattled on again,

“Maybe it’s because it’s a large management company or maybe it’s because of the family-like atmosphere, but it seems like W&U only has nice people. We filmed an interview with Mr. Sung Dowon yesterday, and, man, he really was a great guy.”

“Hahaha.”

It was the funniest thing I heard recently.

Only have nice people? Great guy?

This place was an abode of demons under the guise of showbiz. If, one day, everyone stopped their charade and there was a free-for-all competition between management companies, there probably wouldn’t be anyone who could match the fighting power of this place. We were set to bring home the gold.

After I swallowed down the words that were slowly creeping up inside me and laughed, the floor director carefully asked for a favor. He asked if I could get a few autographs from those three after they were done. He said those pleasant words for this. When I told him I would ask them about it, he was happy as if he was on top of the world.

Once they were done filming the sketch, they stood side by side and said their New Year's greetings. Afterwards, the producer asked a few simple questions as well.

While I was watching this idly, my ears perked when it was Son Chaeyoung's turn.

"Now, what kind of junior is Ms. Lee Songha to Ms. Son Chaeyoung?"

"... What did you say?"

A crack appeared on her facade.

Seo Jijoon, who sat next to her, cleared his throat as he covered his mouth. His eyes were laughing. I suppressed the laughter that was trying to escape and quickly took out my phone.

I had to film this. I had to.

Since everyone would think I was taking this for monitoring purposes, I filmed it openly. Chief Lee Bongjoon, who was sipping

his coffee beside me, snickered as he requested I send him the video as well.

"So, what kind of junior is Ms. Lee Songha to…"

No, I was pretty sure that it wasn't that she didn't hear but that she didn't want to hear it.

Son Chaeyoung slowly closed and reopened her eyes. She probably was swearing a ton inwardly.

Her irritation had probably reached its peak right now since Mermaid out of Water slipped up, but as she couldn't swear in front of the camera, I was very, very curious about what she would say.

Below the camera, which was filming her upper body, Son Chaeyoung's hands tightly gripped the sofa covers. How pissed was she that her veins on the back of her hands bulged?

"Ms. Lee Songha is really…"

After pausing for a while, Son Chaeyoung said slowly,

"Good at acting and kind-hearted…"

A deep breath later, she finally let it out.

"… She's a very dear junior to me."

After the film crew left, Son Chaeyoung glared at Lee Songha with outraged eyes as she shouted that the comment she made was out of courtesy for the viewers before kicking a guiltless table and disappearing.

She had yet to fully develop into a proper human.

This is like saying how she doesn't have a good personality or the qualities of a decent human being.

I sent the video to Chief Lee Bongjoon and also uploaded it to the group chat with Neptune members, Kim Hyunjo, and others.

As everyone held a big grudge against her because of the acting teacher incident, it was obvious the group chat would explode.

Like Seo Jijoon said, Mermaid out of Water was ranked on the real-time search rankings.

Also, its ratings, which had been on a roll, staggered.

After being pressured to make changes, the writer made changes with an unwilling heart, and these 1-2-page scripts, which turned their filming schedule into a mess, as well as hasty editing became the problem, veering the story into a mountain.

The meaning is similar to 'too many cooks spoil the broth', but due to the following sentence, I decided to keep it literal.

The bigger problem was that this mountain was a burial ground.

Although they could climb up when they wanted to, it was impossible to come down from it.

Sadly, I didn't personally encounter Son Chaeyoung afterwards. Only, I heard that she was bothering the PR Team. Something about how they needed to manipulate the media more in times like this.

To be honest, the opinion that they could come back from this after readjusting was still predominant at this time. Well, since it was still the beginning.

However, the situation didn't get better.

The mentality of the writer faltered, and the vicious cycle of countless people, such as the swarms of the original work fans, the broadcasting company, the production company, the directing team, and sponsors, noisily asserting their opinions on this and that repeated itself. Since the situation turned out this way, it would be no use if they published a ton of promotional articles.

Eventually, the next week, Mermaid out of Water's ratings, which had a goal of reaching 20%, fell drastically.

Also, Cat Guardian Ghost's ratings exceeded 10%.

From the Knet dressing room hallway to the recording set, which would only take me 2 minutes to walk normally, it took me 10

minutes to arrive since Next K-Star staff members and broadcasting staff whom I had met previously kept holding me up as they passed by.

Everyone was clamoring to congratulate me. As Cat Guardian Ghost had already placed its name on the record of successful cable dramas, I had already received an overabundant amount of congratulations, but after its ratings exceeded 10%, their reactions were incomparably more intense than before.

This was because we were now actually beginning to exceed public network drama ratings.

Our ratings were still on the rise, and entertainment reporters and critics, who didn't have any expectations of the drama and had expected the drama to go down as a flop in history due to the scandals, said it was a reversal in the special articles they wrote. There were also articles comparing it to Mermaid out of Water, which it started off as the most anticipated project but ended up staggering.

People were making a commotion all around me for various reasons.

Should I say it felt like water filling a dam to its brim?

What would happen if that damn burst, just imagining it was too much for me.

“Mr. Sunwoo!”

Someone called for me.

When I turned around, I saw Producer Go Joontae’s sly face.

“I heard that your drama’s ratings exceeded 10%?”

“Ah, yes.”

When I replied while smiling, Producer Go Joontae smacked his lips.

“Wow, your ratings are going up like a public network’s. If Ms. Songha’s drama continues like this and Next K-Star just passes 8% and ends successfully, then Neptune is really raking it in early this year. Isn’t that, right?”

“That’s true.”

I said with a still smiling face.

“So…”

Producer Go Joontae looked around as if checking his surroundings. With a heart as broad as an ocean, I waited for him to get to the point.

Just then, Producer Go Joontae asked,

“Before other programs can snatch him, I would like to confirm Mr. Seo Jijoon’s appearance on the show and film him and Ms. Songha together on the last episode… Do you have any good news?”

Chapter 73: A Historic Drama For Various Reasons (2)

No, I don’t have any.

“I tried to persuade Chief Lee Bongjoon every time we film, but it seems it will be difficult to take time away from his schedule as it is currently an important time for Cat Guardian Ghost.”

I said with an embarrassed expression.

Producer Go Joontae frowned.

It wasn’t just because I wanted to screw him over, although that did take up a significant portion. Either way, this was the decision I had came to after discussing it with Team Leader Park and Kim Hyunjo.

If Seo Jijoon appearing on Next K-Star was a big opportunity for Neptune, I would have asked Producer Go Joontae first despite his hateful personality. If I asked him whether Seo Jijoon should come on the show or not, he would have immediately taken hold of this chance.

Since business was business.

However, there wasn’t really a need to.

Neptune had gained more popularity than expected due to Lee Songha and also obtained the valuable public image as a talented girl group. Now was the time to solidify this image with a great performance.

However, if we cast Seo Jijoon to appear on the final episode concert where a bunch of spectators were gathered, Neptune might end up being pushed to the side. It could also look like they were using their company connections because they weren't confident in their performance.

Either way, it wouldn't help in their 'talented girl group' image.

Also, exceeding 8% in ratings?

Of course, it would be good if that happened, but even if it didn't, Next K-Star was already a successful program since it kept constant at 6-7% ratings.

If they were going to appear with Seo Jijoon, it would be better to appear on a different program.

After letting out a sigh, I ended by saying,

"I'm frustrated too."

"No, it's not like you guys are strangers. Is this really that hard for them to do when you guys work in the same company?"

Although he tried to sloppily act friendly since it was them who weren't going along with it, like how a leopard couldn't change its spots, his eyes gradually began to show his irritation.

I said once more,

"I'm not at the level where I can make Mr. Seo Jijoon act. I'll try to persuade them until the last episode, but looking at how things are going, I think it'll be difficult."

"Ah, I can't have this fall through. Rumors that I got Seo Jijoon already reached the director."

That was your problem.

I did hear about it. There were rumors about it spreading amongst the staff. That, while everyone was making a fuss trying to cast Seo Jijoon, Producer Go Joontae might be able to. Something about how, because of this, Producer Go Joontae went around with his chin up, receiving the envy of other producers. It seemed this rumor had even reached the director.

Producer Go Joontae pulled his hair. It looked like he was about to shake my neck and shout, 'Bring him! Bring him without fail!'

It was exhilarating.

That was why I told you not to get your hopes up too high.

I tried my best to hide my inner thoughts. The show hadn't ended yet so nothing good would come out of us holding grudges against each other.

Although I didn't know whether Lee Songha would be used as kindling for ratings if Seo Jijoon wasn't cast, since there were calls hoping to cast both Seo Jijoon and Lee Songha from Knet's entertainment department, he probably couldn't straight up mess with her like he did when she was unknown.

The Devil's editing process, maybe it was because we were now experienced with it, but it was endurable. Also, the mood and opinions had been slowly changing as well. At some point, the number of people cursing Producer Go Joontae equaled the number of people cursing Lee Songha.

Producer Go Joontae licked his dry lips and asked,

"If Mr. Sunwoo's words don't work, could Ms. Lee Songha ask him?"

"Songha?"

"If Ms. Songha asks, I think Mr. Seo Jijoon will consider it more seriously. Why it looked like Ms. Songha obediently followed your words so could you ask her to?"

What? Obediently?

Did he think she was some pet?

I stared at him, dumbfounded, when Producer Go Joontae nimbly placed his arm on my shoulder.

“It’s a bit weird if I were to ask her personally. It looks like Ms. Songha is uncomfortable around me. Whatever the method, what’s important is that both parties win, but women are a bit more emotional than business-like.”

Like hell ‘both parties win’.

Whether Lee Songha was bashed or not, all you cared about were the ratings.

When I took in a deep breath as it was getting hard for me to maintain a straight face, a familiar voice cut in.

“No.”

Lee Songha came around a corner and approached us. Perhaps it was because of her stage outfit but her every step exploded with energy. Just looking at her spirit, one might think she was a girl protecting Earth rather than going up on stage.

“Ah, Ms. Songha.”

“Since oppa asked Chief Lee about casting Seo Jijoon, I asked him about it, but he said he couldn’t because he was too busy.”

How surprising. Her voice was calm as if she was following a drama script.

Producer Go Joontae asked with an urgent voice,

“Mr. Seo Jijoon said that? That he couldn’t straightforwardly?”

“Yes. He’s the busiest since he’s the lead. I got scolded at because I brought it up.”

“Do-do you really not want to ask him again?”

“Yes.”

Lee Songha let out a sigh. Oh, my god.

When I saw her between Seo Jijoon and Son Chaeyoung, I had worried whether she would be able to survive in such a jungle, but Chief Lee Bongjoon was right. I was worried for nothing.

It was a weird feeling. Should I say it felt like seeing a tadpole, which I thought had only just been born, already have its hind legs?

I was proud of her.

I exchanged a glance with Lee Songha before looking at Producer Go Joontae.

“I did whatever I could to try to make this happen, but it’s sad that it fell through.”

“Ah….”

It seemed my words were like a death sentence as Producer Go Joontae’s complexion became dark. Though I wanted to throw buckets of shit on his face, I was still greatly satisfied with throwing him what seemed to be a piece of poop at him at least.

Producer Go Joontae’s mouth opened and closed a few times before his expression sank. He was probably daunted by what he should tell the director.

I said my farewell to Producer Go Joontae, whose head was lowered, and left with Lee Songha. Only after we went around the corner did I grin. Lee Songha glanced at me from the side while holding onto my sleeve as if out of habit and asked,

“Are you happy?”

“Of course, I am. I’m completely refreshed. How about you?”

“I’m happy too.”

The sleeve her white, slender hand was holding onto shook in a ticklish manner.

Then a small smile appeared on her coral-colored lips.

Adrenaline swept my body as festive music began to play in my mind.

That was because Mermaid out of Water’s ratings fell even more. It was now close to Cat Guardian Ghost’s ratings. I heard their film sets were a complete mess. Since the Mermaid out of Water’s original fans were causing a fuss on top of that, once Cat Guardian Ghost aired this week, it seemed the situation between Mermaid out of Water and Cat Guardian Ghost would reverse.

Curious about what kind of face Son Chaeyoung made these days, I looked around every time I came to work, but I didn’t encounter her once. I only heard that she was causing trouble for Team Leader Park.

Either way, it was almost time for what I talked with the CEO about to come true.

The thought kept crossing my mind a few times every day recently.

Would CEO Baek Hansung really do what I hoped?

If that was the case, what kind of price would Son Chaeyoung pay?

Then, on Friday night, Lee Songha and I went to the theatres.

The theatres, the place where I would find peace.

The moment I sniffed the sweet smell of freshly popped popcorn, I realized how little leisure time I had the past few months. Oh, my god. There weren't any movies on display that I had watched. On top of that, there were even movies I hadn't even heard of.

Before I started working, I came here multiple times a week. Although my heart wanted to watch around four movies consecutively, sadly I didn't come to watch movies today.

We came to fulfill our ratings pledge.

It was an event the PR team spent a lot of time on, where we would rent out a theatre and watch the broadcast with the fans.

I pushed the massive door open and entered the theatres. I almost gasped when I saw that all 200 seats were filled. Although the fans had first priority, apparently, when they posted it on social media, hundreds of people wanted to attend.

Of course, Seo Jijoon must have had a large influence on that. Even at a glance, the seats were overwhelmingly taken up by women.

Passing by the chatting fans, I went to the seats in the middle.

While it was an exaggeration to say that there was designated press seating, as Cat Guardian Ghost became a hot topic day after day, a few reporters had shown up. They all had a laptop on their laps and were tapping away on their keyboards or checking their cameras.

Amidst them, I saw a familiar face.

“Hello, Reporter Park.”

“Manager!”

She had large glasses and seemed determined on keeping herself warm by wearing a field jacket, a turtleneck, and a scarf. Even though it had been a long time since we had seen each other, Reporter Park Woojeong waved her hand friendlily as she came up to me.

“Wow, I almost didn’t recognize you. In a few months, your atmosphere is just… People who don’t know you will think you’re a veteran manager instead of a new recruit.”

“All sorts of things happened during this time. You look much

more composed as well now.”

“It was really eventful for me too. We really need to have a drink together.”

“That’s what I’m saying. Oh, right. Please write a good article today as well.”

“Hey, no need to say that. I always write Neptune and Ms. Songha’s articles as though I’m writing a work of art. Ah, but.”

Reporter Park Woojeong cautiously asked,

“Did Ms. Lee Songha and Mr. Seo Jijoon arrive?”

“Yes. They are prepping in a temporary waiting room.”

“Could I take a picture of them getting ready?”

It seemed she was embarrassed to ask this as her cheeks reddened. She then glanced at the man looking at us behind her. Seeing as a camera hung around his neck, it seemed he was a photographer. Like how she asked me for an interview last time because her general manager ordered her to, did that person tell her to ask me?

Like I thought, she continued in a quiet voice,

“A rumor that I’m close with you has spread around me so my senior over there told me to at least ask you. If you say that we can’t, then I’ll back off right away.”

“Hmmm, one second.”

When I called Kim Hyunjo, who was in the waiting room, about it, he unexpectedly said it was okay right away. I guided a dazed yet happy Reporter Park Woojeong and the photographer to the waiting room.

As soon as we entered, Lee Songha came over, already changed into her outfit.

“Oppa, where were you? I was about to go looking for you.”

“Why? You thought I might get lost in the theatres?”

“I was just curious where you were.”

“I met her outside. You remember her, right? Reporter Park Woojeong?”

Lee Songha greeted her lightly. Reporter Park Woojeong greeted her back rigidly as though she was a block of wood. Her reaction was still decent. Behind her, the photographer’s mouth was opened so widely that I could see his tongue, which I didn’t want to see, at a glance.

I was already used to reactions like his. It was like experiencing a visual shock.

Although it had only been a few months since I had gone around with Lee Songha, there were times when even I was shocked, especially days like today, where a lot of work went into her hair and makeup. Whether they were a man or a woman, as long as they had eyes, they couldn't help but admire her looks.

On top of that, she was wearing a short dress.

Perhaps she saw that I was looking at her dress, but Lee Songha awkwardly held her dress and asked,

"They say it was sponsored. How is it?"

"It suits you. Well, you'll look pretty even wearing a potato sack."

Just what could she look bad wearing?

After coming to his senses, the photographer took out his camera. Then he took a few pictures of makeup artists sticking next to Lee Songha and Seo Jijoon and fixing their makeup.

While watching this, I suddenly recalled another matter.

“Right, Ms. Park Woojeong. About what we talked about last time, my interview.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Although I’m a bit late, it seems the PR team said it will be okay.”

Reporter Park Woojeong’s eyes widened.

“Really?!”

“But will my interview be article-worthy?”

“I’ll do my best to make it so. Ah, after the interview, I’ll buy beers as well. How’s Monday or Tuesday for you?”

“We have film shoots.”

Lee Songha answered instead of me.

Even though she was putting on makeup, her gaze was focused on us.

“Uh, I saw the schedule, and we have film shoots on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.”

“There probably won’t be any on Wednesday. They say it’s going to snow that day so it’s been pushed back.”

At my words, Lee Songha tapped her phone and quickly said,

“It’ll only snow in some regions. It might not at our film shoot location.”

“Really?”

Damn it. Then the schedule might change again.

These drama shoots were hard work, but having to stay tense while waiting for our turn every day was the hardest part since our schedule would change constantly depending on the weather or situations on set.

I told Reporter Park Woojeong that I would try to make time when I heard a strange laugh. It was Chief Lee Bongjoon. While Kim Hyunjo looked at me as if I was some crazy person, Chief Lee Bongjoon giggled as his gaze alternated between Lee Songha and me.

It was the same look as before.

A somewhat wicked yet exploding with empathy look.

An hour before the broadcast.

With the guidance of the bodyguards, we entered the theatre. I was freaked out when I heard 200 people screaming at once from their seats. There were also camera flashes from photographers on top of that. I was heating up.

We first held a simple event for the fans who had been waiting for us.

The host gave them a quiz, and Seo Jijoon and Lee Songha gave their autographs and took pictures with those who got questions right. I was worried that they might gather around Seo Jijoon too much, but fortunately, there seemed to be a lot of fans of the drama present as there were quite a few who wanted Lee Songha's autograph and photo.

Seo Jijoon skillfully talked with his fans and hugged them, giving them lots of fan service. Lee Songha glanced at him and followed his actions quite well.

I was a few steps away, giving out autograph paper and pens, and even took pictures with my phone in case they were useful later. I took another picture since Lee Songha was looking towards me, and it seemed she knew I was taking a picture as she was smiling subtly in the picture.

Just then, a scrawny man walked out from the center. It seemed to be his turn.

His baseball cap was pressed firmly down on his head, but his

expression revealed below it was strange.

The man's mumbling voice pierced my ears.

"Wow, damn. So hot."

Frowning, I kept my eye on him. It seemed the man requested a hug as Lee Songha spread her arms slightly.

Then, the next moment, the man hugged Lee Songha.

I came close since something felt strange. Although she did give hugs to fans earlier, they were all mannerly and only slightly touched her before backing away quickly. They didn't give her a bear hug as though they were meeting their long-lost family.

Since the host's attention was on Seo Jijoon, I personally tapped the man's shoulder.

"Now, now. That's enough..."

Lee Songha, who had been standing awkwardly and blinking her eyes, revealed a relieved expression when she saw me. I tapped the man's shoulder with more force. But he didn't think to stop and instead grinned as his hand slid down her back.

I frowned furiously.

This bastard, to do this to her, did he want to be arrested?

“I told you that’s enough.”

Chapter 74: A Historic Drama for Various Reasons (3)

I grabbed the man's shoulder firmly and pulled him away.

After being released from the man's suffocating embrace, Lee Songha hid behind my back. Her small hands touched my back, and I felt her hands grasping onto my clothes tightly.

"Are you okay?"

I asked in a low voice. She nodded. Although she didn't show it, it seemed she was shocked as she stuck against my back and didn't think to move. Well, since the dark-clothed man hugged and touched her, it would be weirder if she wasn't in shock.

With a scowl, I glared at the still grinning man.

The man's expression had no trace of seriousness. Instead, he licked his lips and closed and opened both his hands, which had slid down Lee Songha's back.

"Were you surprised? I'm Ms. Lee Songha's fan. I don't know when I would ever have this chance again. Wow, damn. I won't wash my hands for a few days."

"Let's talk outside."

Although words I wanted to say surged up my throat, there were too many watching eyes, especially reporters. If there was a commotion and provocative words, such as ‘sexual harassment’, were tossed into the mix, then it would be the most troublesome for the female celebrity, which was Lee Songha, since various imaginations would run wild and leak to the public without a doubt.

A bodyguard came up quietly and dragged the man out.

Fortunately, aware of the situation here, Seo Jijoon and the host directed people’s attention their way and Kim Hyunjo went to talk with the reporters.

Although those near us were muttered amongst each other, this much would only result in a small incident if uploaded to the internet.

Sighing, I looked behind me.

“Songha, it’s fine now so you can come out.”

“Yes.”

Her voice was faint. I took deep breaths as my insides heated up. Although I had heard instances like this occurred more frequently than expected, after experiencing it personally, I felt my insides boil.

I didn’t think I could sleep tonight if I didn’t swear buckets at that man. I walked in the direction the bodyguard dragged the man towards, but Lee Songha followed behind me. When I looked around, her hands were still grasping onto the clothing on my back.

“Ah.”

It seemed she didn’t realize it either, as she relaxed her hands and blinked.

Then she stared at her own hands.

Silence hung in the air for a few seconds. While Lee Songha was opening and closing her mouth, the chattering host approached her and started a conversation. Then he introduced the next fan who had been waiting for his turn.

The event progressed smoothly.

I sent a text to Kim Hyunjo, asking him to swear my share at the perverted guy.

I couldn’t act personally.

Every time I moved, Lee Songha’s eyes followed behind me.

Although she acted like she was fine, in my eyes, it looked like

she was nervous something like that would happen again. That was why I didn't leave Lee Songha's sight until the fan event ended.

*

On one side of the seats.

Amongst the fans clamoring to answer the quiz questions the host asked, a few people murmured to each other.

"It feels like we're losing out on enthusiasm. We look like losers."

"Seo Jijoon's fans are so scary. I can't even answer the quiz questions because I'm so intimidated."

They weren't fans of Seo Jijoon, who held the absolute majority amongst the fans gathered here today, nor were they fans of the drama, which was the second largest group. They were Neptune fans who had even joined Neptune's official fan café.

"I want to take one picture with Lee Songha, but it seems that the chances are slim?"

"Let's go ask the manager secretly later."

"The manager? The manager will let you if you ask him?"

A man wearing horn-rimmed glasses asked. A woman, who still had baby fat on her round cheeks, nicknamed ‘Songha Eating’ busily snapped pictures of Lee Songha on her camera as she said,

“It depends on who you go to. There are three managers in charge of Neptune, and among them, there are two oppas who are always around them. You can tell just by their faces. One gives you a great impression while the other seems as cold as a chilly breeze.”

“Then we just need to go to the one who gives off a good impression?”

This time, it was another woman who asked. Songha Eating firmly shook her head.

“That oppa is strangely uncomfortable to talk to. Instead, you have to target the other oppa named Jung Sunwoo. People don’t usually approach him because they’re scared, but fans who actually talked with him always beg him. He usually does whatever you ask him for. He takes pictures and gets you autographs.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He doesn’t act in a way that would embarrass us, like be annoyed or ignore us. Ah, but if he says ‘no’ once, no matter how much you beg, he won’t change his mind. There are almost no incidences where he went from ‘no’ to a ‘yes’. He’s completely firm.”

“I need to remember his face. Is he out there right now?”

“He’s right next to Songha… Huh?”

Songha Eating, who was replying, widened her eyes. She saw a man step onto the stage after answering a question correctly, hug Lee Songha, be pulled away by her manager and then disappear out the door accompanied by a bodyguard.

Although this all took place in a few moments, the ones who found something was strange wasn’t only her. There were people muttering about how disrespectful the man was and how they envied him.

However, rather than the man who had hugged Lee Songha then disappeared, their focus was on someone else. It seemed she was taken aback by the fan’s excessive touchiness as Lee Songha stuck to her manager’s back like a turtle shell.

“Oh my god. A back hug… Who is that guy? A staff member?”

“They say he’s the manager. What the hell?! The fans are gathered, but the one who lucks out is the manager?!”

“Look at how close they are. I want to buy his back.”

People spoke noisily as they took pictures.

It was the same for Neptune's fans.

"Wow, Lee Songha felt like a celebrity living in a different world from ours, but when she's like that, she seems more normal."

"It looks like it'll be a hit 'heart-throbbing' picture. I need to post it on their official page."

"Someone already posted it on social media. So fast."

Songha Eating looked at her phone and admired. A picture clearly containing the two people, which was no doubt taken just moments ago, was posted on someone's social media. Then it began to spread widely due to the many people who weren't selected to attend the event and had been looking at pictures instead.

A man beside her scratched his neck as he said,

"But her manager is just a normal guy, is it okay to just post his face without blurring it?"

*

I also predicted this.

Ever since Team Leader Park asked if she could 'sell my face on TV', I accepted the fact that my face might one day spread on social

media and websites.

However, I didn't know that that day would come so suddenly.

"Mom, it's nothing much. You don't need to worry about it."

-What do you mean it's nothing much? Your aunt told me that a picture of you and a celebrity was even posted on an internet article.

The voice on the other side of the call was especially bright. Was this something a parent would be happy of? Well, it was a hundred times better than turning up in the papers under troublesome circumstances, but my face still felt hot.

It wasn't only my parents, I had already been buried under the number of calls and messages I received from relatives and friends. Since my phone vibrated ceaselessly due to the group chat I was in with my friends, I turned off the notifications for it.

Things were hectic since this morning.

Sighing, I picked out snacks for Lee Songha from the aisles.

For some reason, it felt like the convenience store employee was glancing at my face for a while now. It was probably nothing, right? I was probably reading too much into it. On top of that, it wasn't like I was Lee Songha, there was probably no one who would recognize a manager.

I was paying at the counter when I heard my mother's voice mixed with laughter.

-Your father says he's going to print out that picture and hang it in the living room.

"What? No, why?"

-He wants to show our relatives when they come over for Lunar New Year's Day.

I was about to go crazy.

I rubbed my face.

-Your father kept worrying about you day after day at home even if he didn't tell you, but that at least seems to have stopped.

"Well, that's good."

-Are you going to appear on TV?

"I'm a manager, not a celebrity, mom."

Even while saying this, I recalled something. The Lunar New Year's special program that Team Leader Park and Kim Hyunjo

told me about. Well, since they didn't say anything about it until now, it probably fell through.

-Still, you never know. If you going to appear on TV, you have to let me know in advance, okay?

"Okay, okay."

"You've been cast for IBC's special entertainment program."

I had been looking at the large snowflakes falling outside when I quickly turned around.

Team Leader Park, who had dragged me outside for a coffee, was smiling in front of me.

"I've been cast?"

"Yup. It seems they looked into you after your picture was posted. They seem to like you after looking at the comments written by fans who actually met you. I looked it up too and your reputation among the fans is quite entertaining."

"Ah..."

"An interview and now a broadcast, if things go well, you might become a star manager. Be careful you don't catch 'celebrity sickness'."

“Haha, that’s not funny.”

Either way, this was worth celebrating since it wasn’t just Lee Songha but all the Neptune members who were going to appear on a public network entertainment program.

Especially Im Seoyoung, once she heard this news, she would cry tears of joy. She was someone who had constantly polished her talents and read general knowledge quiz books, which looked completely useless in real life, for the day she would appear on entertainment shows.

When I thought about telling them, my heart, which felt like it was swaying in the wind, warmed.

Team Leader Park patted my shoulder with a smile.

“Although your face became known earlier than I expected, I think things turned out well. Think what would have happened if Songha stuck to Jijoon’s back that time? A scandal might have exploded, and she might be getting tons of insults right now. It’s because she stuck to your back, a normal guy, that people are glossing over it by saying it was heart-warming and stuff.”

“That’s a relief.”

I licked my lips and looked back out the window. In this short while, snow began to fall even heavier. Due to the snow being

unexpected on the forecast, the white snow piled on the heads and shoulders of people walking in the streets without an umbrella.

It was because of this snow that filming for Cat Guardian Ghost had halted. They said that they would schedule it later when the snow stops, but it didn't seem like it would stop today.

"But did you come out to just tell me that?"

When I asked while taking a sip of slightly bitter coffee, Team Leader Park frowned.

Then she leaned forward towards me.

"More than that..."

The coffee franchise we were in was bustling with noise at lunch as though it was a war zone so there wasn't anyone paying attention to our conversation, yet her voice was so low that it felt like it would touch the ground.

"I felt like it was about time for Son Chaeyoung to appear."

I opened my eyes wide.

'Should I go see her?' This would have been a crazy thought not too long ago, but now the situation had changed. Since Cat Guardian Ghost, which aired yesterday, beat Mermaid out of

Water's ratings, her face was probably like a demon's.

"Is it because of another promotional article?"

"No, because a commercial came in for Songha."

What?

"That's why I escaped with you. Don't come to work if you can today. Son Chaeyoung's so crazy she might cause a huge fuss at work."

"What relation is there between Songha appearing on a commercial and Son Chaeyoung?"

She wasn't going to make a fuss just because she didn't want Lee Songha to appear on a commercial, right? Even though I thought this, I thought that, if it was Son Chaeyoung, it was plausible since she was a woman who exceeded my imagination.

However, Team Leader Park's words were different from my expectations.

"The commercial for Songha used to be Son Chaeyoung's."

*

Son Chaeyoung entered the empty CEO's office by herself.

Unlike Team Leader Park's predictions, she didn't seem mad nor was she causing a fuss. However, her chilly eyes, which were so cold they seemed frozen, looked like the calm before a storm. It wouldn't seem unusual if she exploded in rage at any moment.

She glared at her phone.

There was one picture on its screen.

The man whose back was turned to the camera looked cold no matter who looked at him, but his eyes were filled with worry. The woman, Lee Songha, held onto his back and stuck close to him. Her eyes contained trust as they looked at him.

Click. The office door opened.

CEO Baek Hansung entered while taking off his coat.

"I heard some absurd news so I came to ask you personally."

"Hmm. Say it."

As he sat on his chair, CEO Baek Hansung nodded his head.

"Is it true the Chinese commercial went to Lee Songha?"

“It is.”

“CEO!”

“I added her in since they wanted to switch you out.”

Son Chaeyoung bit her lips at the CEO’s calm reply.

“So you gave what was mine, not to just anyone, but Lee Songha?”

“It’s better than handing it over to another company.”

Son Chaeyoung gripped her phone. Her eyes burned in anger.

“Why did it have to be her? Do you want to see me go crazy?! Any other person would have been better, I don’t want it being snatched by her! Are you doing this because I haven’t signed the renewal contract yet? I’ll sign. So don’t give her my commercial!”

Son Chaeyoung, who had been causing a fuss like any other time, stopped.

CEO Baek Hansung wordlessly looked at her.

Like usual, he was smiling leisurely, but his eyes were different.

Son Chaeyoung had been with W&U for a few years now. It wasn't her first time seeing his eyes like that. However, his eyes were always gentle when looking at her. Not once was this look directed at her.

Until now.

Avoiding his eyes, Son Chaeyoung bit her lips again. Her lips, which had been bitten for a while now, were red as though they were smeared with blood.

After a moment of silence, Son Chaeyoung raised her head again.

"... Okay. That commercial, let her have it."

Her lips became crooked.

"In return, Songha's manager, assign him to me."

Koreans say this when people believe they've become famous after appearing on TV or the media a few times. People with this 'sickness' tend to be overly attentive of other people's gazes and act a little stuck-up.

Think of it in terms of talent shows. So imitations, dances, etc.

A lot of Korean entertainment shows ask quizzes. A very common question would be 'what is the capital of (insert country name)?'

Chapter 75: A Historic Drama For Various Reasons (4)

So the commercial that went to Lee Songha was originally Son Chaeyoung's.

My lips cracked a smile by themselves. It was such good news I wanted buy everyone a round of coffee. To celebrities, having their commercial snatched away should leave them feeling quite awful. Since hers was taken by Lee Songha, who used to be on a much lower standing than her, would her big head have deflated a little?

Either way, I quickly dropped any thoughts on going to see Son Chaeyoung since I didn't know whether she would be enraged, fuming flames from her mouth.

"It was worth taking refuge. Thank you, team leader"

"Since we're in the same boat, might as well share an umbrella."

Team Leader Park mischievously added,

"If you're really that thankful, why don't you buy me a slice of cake or something?"

"Ah, wait. I suddenly want tiramisu as well."

Smiling, I stood up when my phone rang.

“Yes, hel-“

-Where are you right now? We need to talk.

The coffee that had run down my throat was about to make its way back up.

Her voice rattled on without introducing herself, as though I would definitely know who she was by her voice. Her tone, which indicated that, since she had something to say, I should immediately reply with an ‘okay’. A face abruptly appeared in my mind without any hesitation.

But, what was this? She shouldn’t have any reason to call me.

With a normal person’s way of thinking, I couldn’t guess what she was up to.

-What? Why aren’t you replying? Are you sure this number is right?!

The voice became louder. It seemed someone was next to her as a voice said that this number was the right one. The man’s voice was awkward, and it seemed he was taken aback. Although his voice was faint, he was, without a doubt, the traitor.

Just what was this combination?

Just as I was about to reply while frowning, the world turned black.

“Chief!”

It was the future. As soon as I saw the haziness in my vision, I quickly cleared the complicated thoughts in my head. I didn’t have the time to think of other things right now. Since I couldn’t leave out a single, small detail, I crammed everything I saw in my head.

“Thank god. Chief, did your phone call end?”

A youth with a refreshingly handsome face approached me with hurried steps.

He had a T-shirt on, and his pants were made of a thin material. Was it summer?

There was an unfamiliar person in an unfamiliar place. All I could assume was that we were in a hallway inside a building.

“She’s making a fuss looking for you, Chief Jung!”

My ears perked.

Chief Jung? He was referring to me when he shouted ‘Chief’?

“What now?”

I, so my future self, said in a casual manner.

The unfamiliar youth hesitated before saying in a quiet voice,

“I ran out of there in fear of being lashed out on so I don’t know the details but... Last time, the team leader told me that, if the mood seems critical, to not try to do something by myself and to absolutely leave it to you.”

“Now, really. Am I some babysitter?”

“I’m sorry. I’m trembling in fear. Other people told me that her personality’s gotten a lot better, no, that she changed a lot ever since she started working with you. Then does that mean she was worse be-“

“Personality’s gotten better my ass. It’s hard to be as unchanging as her.”

The conversation was a little strange.

Even while grumbling, my future self began to walk.

The youth followed after me, calling out, ‘Chief, chief.’ The more I heard it, the stranger it felt. I was no longer a rookie manager but

a chief. So days like this really did occur.

Of course, as long as I didn't quit, it was a future I would inevitably face, but it was still far off for me right now. Since it felt like I had taken a step towards my dream, I did feel a little excited.

When in the future was this?

If I could move my lips, I would have immediately asked what year it was. Hoping to obtain even a small clue, I concentrated as much as I could.

The place I arrived at was a playroom. Although it was really unexpected, it was true. A colorful ball pit and a gently sloped slide. They were things I was tired of seeing due to taking care of the quadruplets.

There was also a woman.

I saw the back of a woman with long, braided hair. I heard the cries of a baby. The woman was rocking the baby, who was only wearing diapers, in an awkward manner.

Who was she?

As soon as I thought this, the woman turned around.

"Why are you so late! Take the baby, he's crying."

“I thought something big happened. Babies are supposed to cry.”

“He didn’t cry when you were holding him before!”

“Are you and I the same? Do you know how many kids I took care of? Also, babies have eyes too, you know. Do you think he’ll put up with you staring at him with that face? Just by the fact that he wasn’t shaken up, he would grow up to be a general. He’ll do great things in the future.”

“Hey!”

My thoughts went awry. This was the moment I was supposed to be shocked, but I was confused with just what I should start being shocked at.

The reasons were because the woman holding the baby, who seemed a bit over a month old, asked me why I was so late and that woman was Son Chaeyoung.

She was Son Chaeyoung.

It felt like someone was hammering a stake in my head.

Uncaring about whether my soul was flailing in an abyss of confusion, my future self sighed and received the baby from Son Chaeyoung. Then, while humoring the drooling, whining baby, I

said,

“If the baby cries, you need to look for his mom. Why look for me?”

So the baby’s mother was someone else. Even in this situation, I was relieved. I almost imagined a more terrifying thought. A terrifying imagination that could give me a heart attack.

“I don’t know. I think she left the baby on set and went somewhere because I haven’t seen her for a while now. Either way, I don’t like her. Looking at how someone who calls herself a parent is acting, I can already imagine how it’ll be in the fut-“

Son Chaeyoung, who was grumbling, suddenly shouted,

“Wait, why can’t I look for you?! You’re my manager!”

-Hello?!

I jolted to my senses.

I felt like I was dragged out after being forced underwater. Team Leader Park was sitting in front of me with an odd expression, and the voice sounding out from the phone in my ear talked ceaselessly. It was the same voice as the one I heard a moment ago.

-The line went dead! Don’t just stand there and check the number

again. Either you're blind or he's deaf!

The hairs on my body stood on their ends. I unintentionally pressed the 'end call' button.

I tossed my phone on the table.

"Wasn't that Son Chaeyoung's voice just now? It was, right?"

I slowly nodded my head. Team Leader Park was taken aback and said,

"Why is she calling you... But did you just hang up on her?"

"I was just so surprised."

"Yeah, I totally understand. Breathe. My word. Just how terrifying was it for your face to go pale like that as if you just had a nightmare?"

It was similar to a nightmare. No, it was worse since it was the future.

Oh my god. It was the future.

First, let's calm down. Yeah, although it was the future, depending on my actions from now on, I could definitely change it.

So rather than being confused, now was the time to quickly understand the situation and deal with it rationally.

I tried the Lamaze breathing method a few times but gave up. Damn it, even a monk who had reached enlightenment wouldn't be able to keep calm!

In a hurry, I chugged my coffee and stumbled through my memories.

Although I didn't know how far in the future it was, there was no doubt that I was promoted to a chief. Also, that I was in charge of Son Chaeyoung.

Since I only got a glimpse, I didn't know whether I was in charge of just Son Chaeyoung or others as well, but either option made me shocked and terrified.

Why? Why did I become Son Chaeyoung's manager?

Just where did my life go wrong for something like that to happen?!

At this moment, my phone vibrated once more. It was the same number as before.

I gulped down my saliva and received the call.

“This is Jung Sunwoo.”

-What? Can you hear me now? Is it okay for someone who calls himself a manager to be this difficult to get a hold of? I hate people like that. Your phone’s a piece of crap so change it. Also, we need to talk.

“… Talk?”

Not swear?

“Is there something we need to talk about?”

-There is now.

Son Chaeyoung said right away.

-Because I asked the CEO to assign you to me.

What did you say?!

Shocked, I hurried back to the company.

It seemed that the news had spread during this time as a few employees acted as though they knew me. Those who knew Son Chaeyoung’s true nature gave me sad looks while those who didn’t spouted nonsense about how I had tremendously good luck with

people.

I had good luck with people? Were they trying to drive me insane?

I confronted Son Chaeyoung in a sealed, unlit meeting room.

What kind of trick was this woman trying to pull?

Was the horrible future I saw because of this?

However, whatever the case, I couldn't understand it at all. I would rather quit this damn company than be her manager unless there was some cataclysmic change.

I temporarily stopped my chain of questions and asked,

"Who did you ask the CEO be assigned to who?"

"You, to me."

As if she was incredibly pleased with this situation, Son Chaeyoung looked at me with a smile on her lips. If there was a cake in front of me, I might have been the one to throw it this time.

"Just why?"

“Why is the reason important? The fact that I want to work with you is all that matters. After bringing around a rookie for a few months, you should know how dirty and foul this industry is.”

With her arms crossed, Son Chaeyoung leaned towards me.

“When you were a complete beginner, well, you are still a beginner; I heard you rejected Sung Dowon. Tell me honestly, you regret it, right? You probably regret being swept up by the momentary emotions of the situation and throwing away such a precious chance a ton. That’s why you should grab hold of the opportunity this time. If you work with me, no one will disregard you wherever you go.”

In return for not being disregarded by anyone, I would probably wither up and die staying by your side.

I listened quietly as she created a ruckus by herself.

When I thought about it, her intentions were clear. Unless she had suddenly taken a strange liking to working with her enemies, she was probably trying to keep me by her side and screw me over by finding fault with every little thing.

There was also a good chance that she childishly wanted to snatch something from Lee Songha after having her commercial taken by her.

Damn it. The more I thought about it, the more ridiculous it was.

Why fuss about me? Was I Chunhyang?!

“So what did the CEO sa-“

“Ah, he said he would.”

My heart dropped. Before I had trouble breathing, Son Chaeyoung added,

“If you agree.”

My stiff shoulders relaxed.

So it wasn’t the worst case scenario. Of course, it wasn’t. Not after the conversations I had with CEO Baek Hansung. He probably wouldn’t assign me to Son Chaeyoung of all people. If he did, he wouldn’t be human.

Well, that was that. Considering that he passed the choice down to me, did that mean I could reject Son Chaeyoung right to her face?

“So quickly agree.”

“… Why should I?”

I asked because I was sincerely curious.

With what confidence did this woman think that I would agree?

“What do you mean why? I just said I’m going to help you grow.”

The two eyes staring straight at me gleamed with arrogance. Son Chaeyoung gestured her finger towards me then herself.

“Do you want me to say it again? I am going to help you grow. So stop playing house with that girl and come to me.”

Oh, wow.

Since her attitude was that of someone with a kind heart, laughter unwittingly escaped my lips.

“I will grow on my own.”

“Now, really. It seems you are confused because Lee Songha’s doing well these days, but it only takes a second for her popularity from the drama to die down. Do you think it’s easy to rise to where I am? Can’t you tell which side to take to grow faster? You have a lot to learn.”

I knew one thing for sure.

That Son Chaeyoung thought this was a given.

As if she thought of something after looking at my expression, Son Chaeyoung frowned.

“What? Why? Don’t tell me you’re worried because my drama might fail? The drama hasn’t ended yet. Also, I’m Son Chaeyoung. Do you think I’ll even falter because a drama flops or bat an eye when I lose a commercial?”

I think you did more than bat an eye already.

Since I didn’t need to listen to her any longer, I was about to open my mouth when the meeting room door opened with a thud and a chilling wind and snow blew in.

When I turned around, I was startled. I saw a familiar face at the door. It was Lee Songha. Snowflakes hung from her long hair and her exposed skin was as cold as ice.

Oh my god. In how much of a hurry did she leave that she was wearing clothes she would wear at home, without a coat or anything. On her feet were furry rabbit slippers instead of shoes.

“Songha, did you come from your residence like that?”

As I was taking off my coat for her, Lee Songha took a deep

breath and glanced in my direction. It seemed as though she was checking if there was anything wrong with me. Then she approached Son Chaeyoung with sure-footed steps.

Her eyes revealed an intimidating gleam. It was as though she would proclaim she was a secret royal inspector and throw out a mapae.

However, in her hand was something other than a mapae.

It was a fist-sized snowball with two herb leaves embedded on it like eyes.

I saw someone had made a small snowman on the windowsill of the terrace. There was no doubt she removed its head. When I recalled the previous tiramisu incident, I could easily discern why she brought the snowman's head and what she was going to do next.

Son Chaeyoung, who was about to stand up while glaring angrily, hesitated.

"Hey! Yo-you just try throwing that! If you d-"

Before she could finish talking, Lee Songha threw the snowball at her.

Breathing technique for those preparing for childbirth.

Chunhyang – The main female character in the 'Legend of Chunhyang', the daughter of a kisaeng (someone who entertained

officials and kings and the like as well as provided sexual services). She fell in love with a government official's son, who fell in love with her at first sight. The son, Yi Mongryong, had to move away because of his father's work, but before he left, Chunhyang gave him a ring, promising to stay faithful to him. The new government official in charge, Byeon Hakdo, tries to get her to sleep with him, but she refuses. Because she kept refusing him, he punished her, almost to death.

So this is a tie in with the Chunhyang reference above. Yi Mongryong became a secret royal inspector, went back to Chunhyang's village, and disguises himself to investigate corrupt government officials, in this case, Pyon. He later proclaims his position as a secret royal investigator, presenting his mapae (a 'horse requisition tablet' that he could use to requisite horses and men and as his identification as a secret royal investigator), and punishes Byeon Hakdo. If you're interested in the full story, you can google 'The Chunhyang Story'. So basically, Chunhyang = Jung Sunwoo and Yi Mongryong = Lee Songha.

Chapter 76: A Historic Drama For Various Reasons (5)

"…!"

A brutal sound echoed out.

It looked she tried to dodge it, but the snowman's head precise struck Son Chaeyoung's head.

It was perfect. With four similarly aged kids at home, I was used to snow fights, but this was my first time seeing a work of art like this.

The snow stuck to Son Chaeyoung's forehead, and specks of snow would fall every time her eyelashes trembled and her facial muscles distorted.

"I told you not to throw it. You think I'm some pushover?"

Son Chaeyoung slowly wiped her forehead.

Since it was her second time, she didn't scream, and she reacted faster than the previous time.

The mood felt much more severe than before as well.

"… Songha, come here."

Although my mind felt dizzy just thinking about how to deal with the situation, I couldn't let Son Chaeyoung grab Lee Songha's hair in front of me.

I grabbed Lee Songha's hand and pulled her towards me. How tightly did she hold onto the snowball for her hands to be as cold as ice?

Son Chaeyoung looked at Lee Songha again and said,

"Even if we gloss over what happened last time because I was the first to raise my hand, though he wasn't hit, what's this now? You dare throw a snowball at me, who's many years your senior? Are you testing my tolerance?"

There's no need to test your tolerance.

I really wanted to say this, but I had to handle the situation since Lee Songha threw the snowball in my stead as well. When I glanced at her, water dripped down from Son Chaeyoung's chin.

Although I didn't want to, I took out the handkerchief from my pocket. As soon as she saw this, Lee Songha stretched out her hand, which was wet due to holding the snowball.

She gave me a look that seemed to say, 'Me, me, give it to me.'

In the end, the handkerchief went to Lee Songha.

Son Chaeyoung's lips distorted.

"If I just say one word to the CEO or the director, it's only a matter of time for this to get out of ha-!"

"Say it. Then I will too."

Lee Songha replied.

"What?"

"I might go around telling people what you did to me."

It wasn't only Son Chaeyoung who lost her mind. Lee Songha was worse.

Stopping briefly, Son Chaeyoung glared at Lee Songha.

"Are you saying that you want to face off against me?"

"Last time and now this. You're the one who started it."

"You're going to go around telling people? Do it. I'll tell them I

have no idea what you're talking about. Do you think the company will write a news release in favor of you or me when this blows up?"

"We'll have to see about that. I still have a lot of time left on my contract."

"You dare keep talking back to me!"

Although you couldn't see it, the two of them had thrown a dozen snowballs at each other. The situation was already in disarray

Considering later events, it was correct to hold Lee Songha back as losing was winning in cases like this. Even if it was dirty and foul, this was the right decision.

But why was I so proud of Lee Songha right now?

She didn't lose a single bout against the Great Son Chaeyoung. Was it weird if I thought she developed at a great pace?

It seemed Lee Songha's words were effective as Son Chaeyoung bit her lips. Then she changed the topic. Her tone of speech became more leisurely.

"But why are you causing such a fuss? Because your manager might be snatched away? If you have any brains, think about it. Working with me or with you, which do you think is more

beneficial for his future?”

“That’s...”

Lee Songha glanced at me. Having missed the opportunity to let go, her small hand in my grasp moved. Lee Songha’s hand tightly held onto mine.

“What a sight.”

Son Chaeyoung ridiculed before turning towards me.

“Now tell me, you agree with changing, right?”

“Nope.”

I replied in a heartbeat.

There was no need to consider it unless there was a huge change like I found out Son Chaeyoung was my little sister, whom we had lost for 28 years.

Damn it, that was too messed up. For that lump of trouble to be my little sister.

At my instant reply, Lee Songha and Son Chaeyoung’s expressions changed simultaneously.

I was more shocked that Lee Songha was surprised than Son Chaeyoung. Don't tell me she thought I would agree?

With a dumbfounded expression, Son Chaeyoung asked,

"… You don't want to?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you want to?! Are you serious? Are you out of your mind?"

"I'm serious and my mind is fine."

"Then think about it again. I'll give you one last chance."

"That's okay. I have no thoughts on transferring to Ms. Son Chaeyoung's team. I am very satisfied with my current team and enjoy working with them. I think my future is still a path of flowers."

To be precise, only seeds have been planted in my path, and even though there were piles of poop like the traitor and Son Chaeyoung and Son Chaeyoung and Son Chaeyoung on this path, I just needed to avoid them.

Son Chaeyoung revealed an odd expression as she opened and

closed her mouth. Then she sent me a chilling gaze. Even if I didn't know any better, it was clear that her rigid confidence had crumbled.

"Playing house, I wonder how long that'll last."

After making this sarcastic remark, she opened the door with a bang and left.

I let out the sigh I had been holding back and racked my brains. Since the storm had passed, I had to deal with the aftermath.

Since there wasn't a big aftermath after Lee Songha threw a cake at her last time and since Lee Songha said that she wouldn't go down by herself, it seemed that Son Chaeyoung wouldn't bully her outright.

Still, I decided to tell Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader about it just in case as we were dealing with Son Chaeyoung of all people.

That was that.

"Songha. You can let go now, I feel like it might cramp."

Even though I said it in a joking tone, Lee Songha still gripped my hand. Her expression was dark and gloomy, and I could now guess what she was thinking inside her small head without looking.

Her pale lips moved.

“I’m going to be as successful as her.”

“What?”

“… What’s yours will be snatched if you’re powerless.”

Nervousness and a clumsy malice were currently seeping out from her normally calm voice. I patted Lee Songha’s shoulder with my other hand.

“What do you mean ‘snatched’? Am I an object? I’ll fight and choose where I should be so don’t worry. Also, it’s good that incidents like this can motivate you, but don’t let it make you feel uneasy or impatient. There’s no need to.”

Although they were slightly toe-curling words, I thought it was good I said them.

The malice in Lee Songha’s expression melted like snow. I didn’t miss this opportunity to clear my thought and change the topic.

“Also, the snowman’s head from before…”

“I found it on my way here. It felt like such a waste throwing the cake last time.”

“Uh, yeah. That’s good and all, but next time, if you feel the impulse to throw something, discuss it with me first.”

“Yes.”

Like always, Lee Songha nodded her head. Her powerful grip holding on my hand loosened as well.

With my now-free hand, I handed her my coat which I had taken off a while ago.

“Put this on first. You’re as cold as ice. Who did you hear this from for you to come here like this? Didn’t the other girls try to hold you back?”

“I came out in secret. I’ll probably hear an earful when I go home.”

“Of course, you will. Still, I’ll stay next to you and explain the situation.”

Lee Songha’s eyes widened slightly before gently curving into a smile.

*

A sleek van drove down a snowy road.

The road manager in the driver's seat and Chief Jo kept glancing back at Son Chaeyoung, who sitting in the rear seat. Son Chaeyoung's mood these days called for snow, rain, and clouds, but today, there was a storm warning.

"Oppa."

"Uh, huh? What?"

"What do you think about me leaving the company?"

Chief Jo hurriedly turned around at Son Chaeyoung's indifferent words.

"What?! What do yo-Are you planning on going independent? Or has anyone contacted you for an exclusive contract? Who is it?!"

"If I leave, will you come with me?"

"..... Huh?"

His outpour of questions halted. Chief Jo's eyes jittered quickly. Soon after, while examining Son Chaeyoung's mood, he carefully said,

"That, err. That... you know that isn't a matter to decide easily, right? This industry is small. While you'll be fine, I might get a bad image if I do. You know this. If you get a bad image, it's difficult to

grow in this industry. After growing a little more her-“

“Never mind. It was a joke.”

Son Chaeyoung’s lips curled up into a smile. Although the conversation ended, Chief Jo kept glancing back with uneasy eyes. Son Chaeyoung’s expression, which had been gloomy just before, had cleared up a little.

As Chief Jo was relieved, Son Chaeyoung casually said,

“You know Lee Songha’s manager, right?”

“Jung Sunwoo? What about him?”

“I want to snatch him away from her. Find a way.”

*

I brought Lee Songha back to her residence.

The Neptune members, who were trembling with worry, welcomed us with glaring eyes. Even after Lee Songha was released from being surrounded and scolded by them, my turn didn’t end.

The girls, especially Im Seoyoung, kept looked at me with nervous eyes, so I repeated my words,

“There won’t be any problems. Just trust me.”

“Of course, we trust you, but in a company, a new employee is like a worm! You’ll die if your higher ups step on you!”

Im Seoyoung shouted as she imitated stepping on something with her fur slippers.

While I was thankful she was worrying about me, calling me a worm was a bit too severe.

“You’ve never worked at a company before so where did you hear that from?”

“Do you have to work to know? It’s on the internet.”

“You need to quit using the internet.”

Then I suddenly recalled the good news I had forgotten due to the consecutive shocking events.

“Oh, right. We’re going to be on a public network entertainment show.”

They suddenly became silent.

Im Seoyoung, Lee Songha, who was drinking ginger tea as a preventative measure for a cold, LJ, who was seriously thinking about a way to screw Son Chaeyoung over, and Lee Taehee, who was helping next to her, they all stopped what they were doing and looked at me.

"It's a Lunar New Year's special on IBC. Team Leader Park told me we were set."

"Re-really?! IBC? Public network? We're all going on it?!"

"Yeah. We all are. Since you're appearing with your manager, I'm going on too."

With Im Seoyoung's scream as the start, there was a huge commotion in their residence.

In only a week, there was a significant change.

When I searched 'Cat Guardian Ghost' on portal sites, there were quite a few articles calling it a 'historic drama'.

It was a historic drama since it exceeded 15% ratings.

Compared to GTBN's new drama, which couldn't exceed 1% ratings and was initially regarded as our competitor as it aired at the same time as us, calling it a historic drama wasn't an exaggeration.

Ah, there was another historic drama as well.

Mermaid out of Water. Faced with the public rage of the original work's fans, its ratings dropped to a single digit, making it a historic drama as well. Even those involved murmured that it would be a historical fail.

Either way, the only drama that was doing as well as Cat Guardian Ghost was IBC's Time Slip. As their and our ratings were going neck and neck, people were quite anxious, but I was fine.

A fuse should be burning up over there.

When the bomb explodes, there wouldn't be any competitors remaining.

The best drama of this year's first quarter would be Cat Guardian Ghost without a doubt.

While this heated mood kept continuing day after day, the day of recording IBC's Lunar New Year's special 'Star Manager' finally arrived.

*

IBC Basement Broadcast Studio A.

With 3 hours remaining until it began, dozens of staff members hurriedly moved about. The film crew checked the mountain of equipment. The staff threw their coats and moved things around. The sweat and heat within the studio were enough to forget the season, but there was a cold wave brewing outside.

Production staff members were bustling like bees, chattering on their intercoms.

“Senior, I think we need to change the outdoor set we scheduled to one indoors! They say it’s -14 degrees outside! It’s not like there are only one or two celebrities but a heap of them. How are we going to endure the amount of complaints when the cameras are off?!”

“The gate to hell will open today. Schedule another set. Have the sponsored cars not arrived yet?!”

“They say they’ll definitely arrive before the start!”

“If we delay our starting time, everything will go bust! Tell them to be late if they are confident to take responsibility for that! You are checking the cast, right?”

“Yes, I’m calling them every 30 minutes and checking on them!”

The studio was extremely busy on one side.

A few writers for the special program were discussing while

flipping through the program composition.

"... Next, Neptune. Eunseo, you are in charge of Neptune, right?"

"Yes."

"Since they are rookies, they'll probably listen to you well."

Deputy Manager Shin, who had been examining the mood on set, added in at the main writer's words.

"Rather than how easily they listen, how much broadcast-worthy content we'll get from them is the problem. I said okay because their manager is worth using, but I'm still worried. If they are nervous and don't say a word, they'll be completely edited out."

"They probably won't be completely edited out though? They have a great story."

At the main writer's words, Deputy Manager Shin tilted his head.

"A great story?"

"Neptune's Lee Songha is hot right now."

"Yeah, she's amazing at acting."

“Although she’s proven herself now, before the drama aired, there was huge commotion concerning her acting controversy and that she was just an ‘add-on’. They told us that they would talk about some of the behind-the-scenes of that commotion when they appear today.”

“Really? Is it fun?”

“It’s fun. It also works with our program concept.”

The main writer said, satisfied.

“Their manager’s story was the most entertaining.”

This means that he expects his future to still be good. Normally, the phrase is used to say ‘I hope good things happen to you in the future’.

Pretty much, they’re in for a lot of trouble today.

Chapter 77: Star Manager (1)

“Oh, my god. Look at this. This. It’s good to constantly moisturize your skin and provide it with nutrition during winter. Still, you don’t have any blemishes. I’ll add a light foundation. I think I just need to smooth out your skin.”

“… Please just end it.”

The moment I sat in front of the dressing table, I had emptied my heart.

The mustached artist affiliated with this shop smiled slyly. In his hand was a flat makeup brush. He dabbed the brush in a beige cream instead of paint and brushed it on my face.

“Oppa.”

Im Seoyoung poked my shoulder from the back.

“What?”

“I just wanted to call out to you.”

Im Seoyoung’s face was reflected in the mirror in front of me. Her large, round eyes narrowed into crescent moons. She giggled in a way which didn’t suit the smile from her eyes that seemed like it could even melt ice.

“Oppa, oppa, oppa.”

“What, what, what?”

“Since I already called out your name, I just wanted to say it three more times.”

After saying this, she walked around me and looked as if I was some amazing spectacle. She reminded me of something. Her curly hair reminded me of fur and her shaking flared skirt reminded me of a tail.

She seemed like a dog running in the snow, no, she was more like a puppy.

“I understand that you’ve been waiting for this day for a long time, but come to your senses.”

“Oppa, how do you feel sitting there?”

“What do you mean how do I feel? I feel like I’m receiving punishment.”

No, I would feel more at ease if they just scribbled on my face with permanent markers.

I was extremely lucky that Kim Hyunjo and the traitor weren’t

here.

“Ehh, how can you consider this a punishment? I bet you’d be foaming at the mouth if you were to receive full makeup! Do you want to try blush as well? They say this year’s spring/summer color is light coral. This, this, my lipstick color!”

“Stop speaking such nonsense and just sit down. Why are you so excited? You’re going to be exhausted before the recording if you’re like this.”

“I’m fine! My condition today is amazing!”

She raised her fists as she shouted confidently.

“Stop driving me crazy and eat your lunch, dummy.”

LJ approached and slapped Im Seoyoung’s back.

Her blonde cascading hair and her makeup which curved her eyes in a sleek fashion made her look especially cat-like today. A street cat wearing the guise of an expensive breed.

I thought that it would be nice to take a picture of the two of them right now.

People from the fan café had already made comparison photos about how they were like cats and dogs. This would make great

bait.

Just as I thought this, LJ shoved her phone towards me.

Then she took my picture.

“What are you doing? Why did you take a picture of me?”

“Because I think it might be useful in the future?”

“… Don’t take pictures and don’t use them either.”

“If you hate it that much, it makes me want to take more. I’ll use it for a good cause.”

Then she smiled slightly. It was an eccentric smile.

Im Seoyoung leaned towards LJ’s phone and said,

“Me, me, me. Send me those pictures you took!”

“I don’t want to?”

“Ah, damn it. You meanie! Fine, I’ll just take pictures on my phone!”

She brought her phone over and took pictures of me. I sighed as I looked towards Lee Taehee and Lee Songha, hoping they were a bit better behaved.

Hmm. They were as well-behaved as ever. They couldn't help but be well-behaved.

Lee Songha was sitting on the sofa and eating her lunch while Lee Taehee was sleeping on Lee Songha's lap.

"When does today's recording air?"

The artist's assistant asked while smiling brightly.

"Lunar New Year's Day."

"I'll definitely watch it then. I think the program will be fun. I think it'll be fun if you just act like this in front of the camera without any MSG."

"This is fun?"

"Yes. We see celebrities and managers all the time. There are many teams that give off such a bad mood that we can't even say a joke. But this team seems really close with each other."

"I hope that it looks that way on the broadcast as well."

Really.

It was a public network broadcast and I candidly agreed to do it because Kim Hyunjo and Team Leader Park said I was the most suited for it, but I still wasn't sure if this would be good.

I didn't have the comedic senses that could make others burst into laughter on entertainment shows, and above all, I didn't really enjoy watching entertainment shows in general.

Since I was going on the show anyway, I had to be of use to the girls.

It seemed she saw my serious expression as Im Seoyoung patted my shoulder with the tips of her fingers.

"Don't worry, oppa! All you need to do is stick next to me! My talents are perfect, and I picked out and practiced a ton of possible general knowledge quizzes! I even thoroughly memorized the capitals of countries!"

"She really spent all night memorizing them. It's not like she's trying to take a university entrance exam or anything."

LJ said while clicking her tongue.

Im Seoyoung swiftly turned and leered at her.

“We need to be fully prepared so that we can show up on air often! Entertainment shows are like jungles, jungles! If you go without any preparations, you could be disregarded by other people on the show and even be edited out entirely!”

After scolding in a rapid-fire fashion, her eyes shined as she added,

“Do you know how big of an opportunity this is? I’ll show them everything I have out there!”

The title of the special was ‘Star Manager’.

The concept looked simple. The compatibility between celebrities and their managers.

It was a mix between a talk show and a variety show, where they gathered a bunch of celebrities and their managers, talked and played a few games before finally giving a prize to the team that was picked as being the most compatible.

The prize was a high-quality beef set.

It seemed Lee Songha’s drive surged as her eyes shined brightly.

Well, the talk show was simply an attempt in bringing out fun stories from managers who knew the most about their celebrities’ personal lives.

This seemed somewhat fine, but the games were the problem.

The game was called ‘Stop telling me to do this and that and you do it’.

They said it was a ‘walking in someone’s shoes’ type of game where the positions of managers and celebrities were switched. The broadcast composition was so simple that no matter how many times I read over it, I couldn’t tell what we were specifically going to do.

“Hey, you look the part. You really do.”

Kim Hyunjo, who arrived late, said as he glanced at me.

But why was he by himself?

“Where’s Gunyoung?”

“I assigned him some other work and came by myself. How are the girls? They’ll probably be nervous since it’s their first time appearing on an entire entertainment special on a public network, with all four of them to boot.”

“I think I’m the most nervous out of all the people appearing on the show today.”

At my words, Kim Hyunjo grinned.

“It doesn’t really show even if you are nervous. Your impression and mood will give you a boost. You just need to act naturally.”

Although I took the girls around to their schedules without Kim Hyunjo these days, maybe it was because I was a part of the cast and not a manager this time, but having Kim Hyunjo here was reassuring.

“Well, I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah. Also, don’t forget to talk about Lee Songha’s incident during the talk show segment. Since that part is undoubtedly going on air, prepare what you’re going to say ahead of time.”

“Of course, I will. But chief,”

I licked my dry lips and asked,

“Is it really okay to mention him on air?”

“It’s something that came from the higher ups. Even the CEO personally okayed it. Before this airs, the company will also put out a news release.

Kim Hyunjo firmly nodded his head.

“That’s why you don’t need to worry about the aftermath and just talk. That man needs to be screwed over. Although it’s a pity we can’t straight up say his name, even this is disgracing that man’s arrogant face.”

“Right?”

“Of course.”

Kim Hyunjo smiled creepily.

As if infected by it, my lips raised into a creepy smile as well.

I thought that I had become used to seeing celebrities after working as a manager for a few months now, but today felt different.

If the majority of celebrities I had seen until now were actors and singers, there were many comedians and TV personalities here today.

While going around the dressing rooms and greeting them, I felt exhausted.

Rather than calling it a greeting, it was more of an investigation. Although Next K-Star was an entertainment show as well, this place was on a completely different level from it. I could understand why Im Seoyoung said that entertainment programs were a jungle.

Not long after, the girls, wearing their sponsored clothes, came to me.

But one person was missing.

“Where’s Seoyoung?”

As if frustrated, LJ clicked her tongue and said,

“She’s in the waiting room. She said she’ll come after practicing her talents one last time before the recording.”

“She’s practicing again?”

This time, Lee Songha replied,

“We came out ahead of her since she said she couldn’t concentrate with us there.”

I was about to go to the waiting room when Lee Taehee held me back.

“It seems she’s overwhelmed by pressure.”

“Pressure?”

Her eyes, which were as calm as lakes, shined with worry.

“Back when we were completely unknown, Seoyoung went on several entertainment programs to spread our name. Maybe it’s because of that, but it seems she thinks everything rests on her shoulders. She looks like she’s feeling a lot of pressure, but she won’t talk to us.”

LJ and Lee Songha both added in,

“She was making an abnormally big deal out of everything at the shop today. She keeps going back and forth like a puppy that has to go. Her condition must be crap since she stayed up all night so it’s concerning she says her condition’s great.”

“Also, she didn’t eat much this morning. She didn’t even touch her lunch.”

“Hmm, okay. Go in first and let the chief know.”

After leaving the girls behind, I quickly headed to the waiting room.

I should have observed her more carefully.

Although I did think that she was more agitated than normal, I thought it was because she really wanted to appear on entertainment shows. Was she suffering from pressure while showing a cheerfully smiling face?

I immediately opened the door and entered the waiting room.

No, I stopped before I went in. Im Seoyoung stood rigidly right behind the door.

“Seoyoung.”

“Uh, oppa! I was just about to go!”

Im Seoyoung tilted her head. Her voice was as bright as usual. However, it was definitely different. It was the same for her slightly reddened eyes and her trembling pupils.

“Are you very nervous?”

As soon as I asked, Im Seoyoung shook her head in a wide motion.

“No? I’m fine!”

“No, I don’t think you are.”

“I really am. Let’s go quickly, oppa!”

However, unlike her words, Im Seoyoung couldn’t take a single step passed the door. Her round shoes moved hesitantly before

returning to its place.

“Ah, damn it. Why am I like this…?”

She squatted on the floor and covered her head with her arms.

I heard sniffling coming from her mumbling voice. I went inside and closed the door. Im Seoyoung, who had lowered her head, raised it slightly. Sure enough, tears had welled up in her large eyes.

“No, I can’t cry. The mascara might run!”

“Ah, really, is it time to worry about that right now? You still have time to fix your makeup so it’s fine.”

I said in the lightest tone I could in order to make her relax a little, but it seemed it didn’t help. I was flustered and didn’t know what to do.

I sat in front of Im Seoyoung and met her gaze.

“You should have told me if you were this nervous. It’s not like you’re committing a sin or anything, why are you trembling in nervousness by yourself in the waiting room?”

“I was definitely fine. I really was. But,”

Im Seoyoung bit her lips.

“This is a really big opportunity. It’s on a public network, and it’s a Lunar New Year’s special. We’ll appear in it for the full hour. I always thought that it would be great if we could get an opportunity like this and that I would really do well if we got the opportunity. That’s why I practiced every day… But I suddenly became scared.”

“Why?”

“… We got this opportunity, but what if I suck?”

I thought her voice was shaking, and in the end, a tear fell from her tightly closed eyes.

The dam that had endured for this long finally broke and it was instantaneous afterwards. A second and third tear dripped.

“Euaah, I’m crying. What do I do?! I need something to wipe it.”

Worried her tear would flow down her cheek and ruin her makeup; she positioned her face towards the floor and flailed her arms.

I pulled out a few tissues from the tissue box in the waiting room and handed them to her. Im Seoyoung received them and carefully patted her tears.

I kept pulling out tissues as I thought about how I could calm her down.

I first patted her shoulders. When I did, she quickly shrunk away.

“Ah, you can’t. If you do that, I’ll cry more! Tears are dripping just by hearing your voice!”

With no other choice, I pulled my hand away and said,

“Will the world collapse if you mess up a little this time? You just need to do better next time. Your next album will be released soon and you’ll have many opportunities to appear on entertainment shows in the future. I’ll work to the bone and keep getting you shows.”

“I have to do well this time too. I went on entertainment shows the most. Hyunjo oppa, Taehee unni, LJ, and Songha. They’ll all be thinking that I’ll do well.”

“What?”

“I’m a stupid dummy…!”

Im Seoyoung slammed her head against the door.

So in this case, the assistant is saying that they just need to act natural and don’t need to try to be fun and entertaining.

Explained previously, but basically, ‘impersonations’, ‘imitations’, ‘singing’. ‘jokes’, etc.

A very popular entertainment format in Korea. Examples of these are 2 Days 1 Night, Infinite Challenge, Running Man, and etc.)

Chapter 78: Star Manager (2)

My hand reflexively stretched out. Im Seoyoung's round forehead hit my palm instead and bounced off. Then, before I even had time to catch her, she fell onto the floor.

Im Seoyoung's face was scrunched up as though she was so sad she could die.

I inwardly clicked my tongue as I gave her my hand.

"Why bully your perfectly fine forehead? Do you want to go to the emergency instead of the studio?"

"Nooooo. Eung."

She faltered as she got up. It seemed she still wanted to be on the show. As though she barely managed to contain her tears, she bit her lips and sniffed her nose.

She waited so much for this opportunity, but it seemed like pessimistic thoughts flooded her mind now that the opportunity was in front of her. Creating an obsession that she had to do well and an uneasiness of what if she didn't. As well as the fear that she might disappoint her colleagues who believed in her.

"Stop digging yourself into a hole and think about it calmly. Just because others call you the 'girl breadwinner, girl breadwinner', do you really think you are one? The chief or the other girls, they

won’t be disappointed that you couldn’t get more screen time. Instead, they’ll probably freak out if they knew that you were thinking this way.”

I said it as gently as I could since it seemed her mind had turned into mush.

“You think you’re a genius who sweeps through all the entertainment shows you going on? Just think of it as throwing your hat into the ring of public network entertainment shows. Also, let’s be honest. Do you think the one to cause an incident will be you or me today?”

Im Seoyoung looked up at me with wet eyes and asked,

“Oppa, how are you so okay? You’re not even a celebrity. Aren’t you scared about your first recording?”

“Do I look okay?”

“Yup. Completely okay.”

“I’m not. I’ll be honest, only half my brain’s been working since yesterday. I’m regretting that I didn’t take a cheongsimhwan.”

After saying this while sighing, Im Seoyoung replied with smiling eyes,

“To be honest, I secretly took a cheongsimhwan.”

“You ate one by yourself? If you have good stuff like that, then you should share.”

“I thought you were fine!”

Im Seoyoung lightly tapped my arm.

“Wait, I have one more. I brought another just in case.”

Then she really did take out a cheongsimhwan from her bag. I laughed in surprise, but she unwrapped then handed it to me. I didn’t reject and swallowed it down.

“Thanks. Let’s do this somehow with the help of the medicine.”

“Umm, oppa, just, just in case…”

“Yeah, say it.”

“Could you say that today will go well just once? Hmm? You said it would go well and Songha’s drama went well and so did the incident with Taehee unni’s song. I easily believe in stuff like that. I want to grab the tail of the lucky snak-“

“Okay, today will go well.”

Although I didn’t see the future and because I didn’t, I couldn’t be certain, but I still said it.

Tears dangling on her eyelashes, Im Seoyoung smiled broadly.

“Hey, if you smile after crying-“

I stopped what I was saying. Hmm, it wasn’t proper to say that to a fully-grown woman.

“Can you tell I cried?”

“Yeah.”

“Euah, what do I do? I can’t let them notice. What should I say?”

“Let’s say you hit your head on the door while practicing your talents.”

“What’s that?! That makes me seem like a dummy!”

“What’s new about that? You’re the one who said that you were a stupid dummy.”

When I said this while smiling, Im Seoyoung rattled on about something while slapping my arm. Although it wasn’t like the

pressure had completely disappeared, fortunately, it looked like her tears had gone away.

Really. I didn't think I could ever get used to comforting someone when they were crying.

Just as I thought this, the tips of my fingers touched thin strands of hair. I jolted to my senses. It seemed the habit I had around the quadruplets arose as my hand was on Im Seoyoung's head.

"Ah, sorry. I thought of my brother's kids."

"What? What about it? Why are you sorry? I'm fine?"

"Women don't like their head being pet."

"No, I like it."

Then she lowered her head slightly. Her eyes had, at some point, curved into crescent moons.

I placed my hand on her head once again.

Maybe it was the effect of the cheongsimhwan or because of animal therapy, but my heart relaxed gently.

As soon as we left the waiting room, we encountered Kim Hyunjo

and the other girls. It seemed they had enough of waiting and had come to get us.

Without a trace of having been digging herself into a hole, Im Seoyoung, mixing amidst the girls, lied naturally that she had hit her head on the door and cried because it hurt so much. Though, it didn't seem like anyone believed her.

'Will she be okay?' Kim Hyunjo mouthed to me.

I silently nodded.

Then, not long after, we all stepped onto the studio set.

*

10:35 a.m. A spacious VIP dressing room.

Producer Yoon, who gave a gaunt, rigid impression, and Writer Park, who was experienced in the public network entertainment scene as a main writer for ten years, both of them were flipping through each cue card as they explained the rules.

"Also, Im Seoyoung of Neptune apparently went on a few entertainment shows. So when you pass the conversation over to them, it'll be good to pass it over to her to prevent any trouble..."

"If they can't receive the conversation properly when I pass it to

them a few times, then I'm not going to talk to them,"

Said one of the MCs, Park Taepyeong, a comedian who debuted with IBC and was known for his irritable character. Hong Sukwoo, the other MC, who debuted as an anchor and had been leisurely eating an energy bar, replied,

"They said they are rookies. Hyung, are you going to step and kill them before they can even grow?"

"I'm saying if they can't when I pass the conversation to them, if! When the cast is so large, are we going to teach those who can't even follow up on a conversation? Is this a school? If they can't even do that, then tell them to go on a cultural program and just read the script!"

"Haa, this is why all our juniors find it hard to approach you."

"I care about those who do well!"

Writer Park, who had been listening to their conversation, smiled as she cut in,

"Okay, okay. Glossing over the celebrities, please pay attention to the managers. They are just normal people."

Producer Yoon lowered his head as he requested,

“That’s right. Although we did pick those who should be good on air, you know it too. If we place normal people in front of a camera, no matter how great of a talker they are, they can’t show their full ability. If seniors don’t save them, our broadcast will flop.”

“Tell doctors to save them. Well, are there any decent people?”

At Park Taepyeong’s reply, Producer Yoon licked his lips.

“Lee Hyunjong’s manager has a sense for it since he’s been on air a few times. Jang Noksu’s manager was someone who used to be an aspiring comedian. Also, Neptune’s manager has a few stories about Lee Songha so we’re keeping an eye on him as well.”

“Haa, we see celebrities on air all the time. If we want to beat out other network’s Lunar New Year’s specials, then there needs to be a gem amongst the managers.”

Park Taepyeong clicked his tongue as he flipped through the managers’ profiles.

Hong Sukwoo smiled as he added,

“We’ll look for one. A gem.”

10:55 a.m. 10 minutes before the recording.

The lights poured onto the set like the scorching summer sun.

In the middle were seats for the two MCs, and stands fanned out from either side. On one side were gorgeous celebrities and on the other sat managers with name tags on their chests.

A young, female producer explained in front of the clearly nervous managers,

“Since we’re not a live show, you can speak with ease. As you all have mics on, the audio will pick up everything you say so no going off on tangents. Also, the writers are going to be continuously writing instructions so constantly watch them through the corner of your eye.”

“Yes, understood! I’ll do my best!”

Jang Noksu’s manager, Kim Dongho, shouted in a loud voice.

“Just do as you did in the prior interviews, Chief Kim.”

“Don’t worry. The beef set will be mine and Noksu’s.”

His expression was different from any other manager. The tenser other managers looked, the more composed his expression became. That was obvious since he was confident he would be stand out the most among them.

As soon as the producer stepped off the set, the managers began to talk with people next to them. Sitting at the end, Kim Dongho was cursing the producer who had guided them as he glanced to the person next to him.

Neptune's manager. Jung Sunwoo.

He wasn't the type of person Kim Dongho liked.

First, he was taller than him, and on top of that, he looked quite distinguished because he was from a big company. Also, he looked very much at ease as he sat with his legs crossed and was waving to Neptune on the other side.

Why was this person so carefree? Was he a team leader?

Inwardly complaining, Kim Dongho started a conversation.

"Excuse me, hello. You're sitting next to me so I hope you can provide good reactions."

'Although I'm not going to.' He swallowed this thought.

"Ah, yes. Please take care of me."

Jung Sunwoo greeted him. Kim Dongho frowned subtly. Although he didn't look like he would be disliked by the viewers, he still wasn't likable. However, after listening to his voice, the

scales tipped more towards being ‘likable’.

“Why did you come on the show? If it’s Neptune, ah, is it to help the rookies grow?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Ah, you must be going through a lot, being assigned to rookies. I was cast before this program was proposed. I used to be an aspiring comedian. Though, I’m a manager because I wasn’t lucky. My dream is still to become a broadcaster.”

“Then you must not be worried about today’s recording.”

“It’s a program meant for me.”

Trying his best not to sound arrogant, Kim Dongho continued to speak,

“Also, as someone who’s worked in this industry for 6 years, what is there to be nervous of? Other people should have also been working for a few years now so I don’t know why they are so nervous. Don’t you think so?”

“I’m not very experienced. I ate a cheongsimhwan before I came.”

“Ah, really? You don’t look inexperienced. How long have you

been working?”

“4 months.”

Kim Dongho blinked.

“No, not as Neptune’s manager, in total.”

“Yes. It has been 4 months since I’ve started working.”

“… Ah.”

Kim Dongho ridiculed himself for having been wary of him.

He was only for display.

*

11 a.m. They began.

The studio, which had been bustling with dozens of staff and involved parties, became silent. The faces of the celebrities in front of me and the managers around me changed. I could even feel a prickling sense of tension.

The two MCs, who would appear whenever you turned on the TV, skillfully progressed with the opening.

Fortunately, Neptune didn't look very nervous. Even Im Seoyoung, although she was still a little stiff in the shoulders, she was much better than before. It seemed the MCs looked at them favorably as Neptune's introduction was longer than others.

The problem was this side. The managers.

The phrase 'general crisis' was meant for situations like this. Every time an MC talked to them, there would be silence for a few seconds. Also, over half of them would stutter or say some nonsense. I felt that the producers would have a stomach full of frustration when they went to edit it later.

There was only so many times the MCs could gloss over it with jokes, Park Taepyeong looked like he was about to throw the cue cards at us a few times now. Even the faces of the producers and writers were becoming gloomy.

Although it wasn't nice to say it was thanks to them, seeing the managers messing up made my heart more steadfast. Should I say it was learning from others' faults? My parents and relatives would be watching this, maybe my entire family would gather to watch this, so I couldn't show myself acting like them.

I thought my self-introduction went well since Kim Hyunjo's expression was good when I looked at him from the side.

After the introductions of the cast and a light talk about their private lives ended, the MCs placed a toy-like object on top of each

manager's table. It was semi-circular and was barely big enough to fit on a person's hand. On top of it were grooves for fingers.

I thought I saw something like this somewhere.

The MCs mischievously said,

"Now, managers, put your hands on top of those devices!"

"Those viewing the broadcast probably know this, but these are portable lie detectors."

Lie detectors?

"From now on, we need only the truth to come from managers' mouths. But because the relationship between a manager and celebrity could be unhealthy or maybe because they are aware of their company CEO, they might unconsciously lie."

"That's why we prepared this. Since the device will shock you if you lie, you will have no choice, and I emphasize this because it's important, you will have no choice but to tell the truth!"

Murmurs erupted around me.

I carefully placed my hand on top of the lie detector.

Maybe it was because I had so many things that could be considered secret, but this small device felt like a bomb to me.

The truth, huh?

What would the MCs ask me? There wasn’t anything that could be considered a lie in the lines I prepared beforehand. Also, even if it was a lie detector, it wouldn’t be as precise as those that appear in dramas since it seemed like they were doing this as a joke.

Well… There wouldn’t be any trouble, right?

Refers to younger members being the breadwinner of their household (or in this case, Neptune).

Pills that relax one’s heart. Sort of like anxiety pills.

‘If you laugh after crying, you’ll grow a horn on your butt.’

Chapter 79: Star Manager (3)

I had thought this when I was at a loss for words at the first question.

"Manager Jung Sunwoo, who do you like the most out of the four members of Neptune?"

Who did I like the most?

I reflexively turned my gaze towards the girls sitting on the other side.

The girls, who had been diligently reacting to other celebrities' remarks just now, were looking at me without blinking.

The other cast members commented jokingly with 'what a difficult question' and 'you have to answer wisely'. Although there were annoying questions before this, it was the first time a question like this popped up. Ah, but we were the only ones who came on as a group.

"He's at a loss for words. Of course, this is a sensitive question!"

"If you have four members, then there will undoubtedly be differences as humans."

"Should we ask the members first? Who do you think your

manager will say?”

Hong Sukwoo asked Im Seoyoung while smiling. Those guys, their eyes were gleaming with the intentions to do whatever it took to make this situation fun.

Im Seoyoung, who had been opening and closing her mouth as though she was thinking of an answer, shouted,

“I.. think, me! I vote me! Because the cheongsimhwan I gave oppa is still digesting right now!”

“You give your manager cheongsimhwan because you were worried he might be nervous. You guys are close!”

“Then Ms. Songha, who do you think he’ll say?”

Lee Songha, the second one to be asked, replied right away,

“I think it’ll be me.”

“Then I think it’ll be me too.”

LJ added in as though she found this interesting. Finally, Lee Taehee followed suit while scratching her cheek. I was very suspicious that the two MCs incited her to do so with their eyes.

“Wow, you must be in a bind.”

What bind? This was a question I could never worry about.

“I like all four of them.”

I said in a casual manner.

Hong Sukwoo smiled like a snake and looked at my hand.

“You like them all equally?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Definitely.”

I stole a glance at my hand which was placed on the lie detector. From what I knew, this device would measure the subject’s sweat or heartbeat to roughly estimate how nervous the subject was.

I wasn’t sure why, but it seemed there was an unknown change in my body.

I felt as though I was patting a porcupine.

This stung more than I thought.

“You’re the type of person to play tricks during poker, you are. I saw you flinch!”

Park Taepyeong approached to my side like a hyena that had found its prey. Hong Sukwoo’s eyes shined as well.

“Life is not fair so don’t lie and just say the truth.”

“Isn’t it Ms. Lee Songha? I saw the picture of you two not too long ago.”

I wet my lower lip and said,

“I’m not the type of person who lies on air. Aren’t you controlling this with a remote somewhere?”

“This guy’s quite stubborn. This should be giving you quite the shock. Doesn’t it hurt?”

I glanced at the girls again. Sitting close to each other, they were still looking at me like four meerkats.

I cleared my throat and said in a small voice,

"… Pain is fleeting, but the aftermath will last a long time."

Hong Sukwoo giggled as he glanced towards the staff. A writer was holding up a sketchbook. In a large font, it read 'Mention Mr. Sunwoo's quadruplet nephews and nieces'.

I informed my brother and the kids ahead of time since this story might come up, but it came up as soon as we started. Was it to set a character for me?

"Hmm, I received questions like this quite a lot before."

"Questions like this?"

Hong Sukwoo feigned ignorance as if he didn't know.

"My brother has quadruplets. It was a question I received a lot while I was taking care of them, but I have never picked one of them. That was why I was able to stay safe until now."

Hong Sukwoo laughed loudly, though I didn't know whether he was really laughing or if it was for the broadcast.

"What sort of coincidence is this? A person who used to take care of quadruplets is now in charge of a four-member girl group?"

"How did you feel when you were first assigned to Neptune?"

To be honest, I thought that I was ruined.

“I felt like I could fl-Ah, this seems to be broken.”

Damn it, this device’s performance was quite good despite looking like a kid’s toy.

“What do you it’s broken? Anyone would think that that comment came from some script!”

“What do the Neptune members think? He just lied, right?”

At Hong Sukwoo’s question, Im Seoyoung gulped her saliva and replied in a clear voice,

“It’s only been four months since he started, we’re his first assignment.”

Reactions about how I only worked for four months erupted from here and there. Well, since I was already used to being misunderstood thanks to my appearance, this wasn’t anything new. Either way, maybe it was because she gained more confidence because of other people’s reactions, but Im Seoyoung continued to speak.

“He said that he originally wanted to be assigned to an actor instead of a singer. So he might not have liked it in the beginning, but it’s different now. He had a chance to be assigned to a top actor, but he declined and stayed with us.”

“Oh, a top actor? There are a few top actors that come to mind when thinking of W&U.”

“Since there are so many people aiming for him, I’m worried all day and night. It’s not like I can ask him to be bad at his job either.”

Im Seoyoung shook her head. Next to her, Lee Songha diligently nodded her head.

Park Taepyeong said,

“If you wanted to be assigned to an actor, you’ve fulfilled your wish. Ms. Songha is gaining popularity through her drama these days. There has been an outpour of praise saying how she’s like a sudden shower in the drought of actresses.”

The topic smoothly changed to Lee Songha’s story.

Since it was something we had talked with the staff about beforehand, Im Seoyoung was the first to talk.

“But that too was because of oppa. Just a few months ago, Songha didn’t have any thoughts on acting, let alone appearing on a drama. If oppa didn’t catch her as she tried to flee and told her to act, I don’t know how things would be now.”

The cast members murmured amongst each other.

“You had no thoughts on acting originally? But why?”

“I saw the drama too, and you were amazing at acting?”

To be honest, today’s broadcast was not only the commemorative day Neptune appeared on a public network but also the stage to leak this truth as naturally as possible.

I met Lee Songha’s eyes.

I nodded while smiling. If cameras weren’t currently filming my face right now, I would have shown the sinister smile I revealed in front of Kim Hyunjo previously.

Under the flood of gazes focused on her, Lee Songha began to speak.

They were the words we hadn’t been able to speak out into the world even though we had been exploding with anger.

“I did receive acting lessons in the past, but the acting teacher told me I sucked at acting. He said that people like me shouldn’t act and to not even dare think about it so I thought that I was really bad at acting.”

“What sort of nonsense is that? Just where does a person like

that come from?”

“Haaa, you were caught by a complete quack!”

Reactions erupted like bustling bees.

It seemed that they thought a story as great as this wouldn’t be edited out as the cast members remarked using the most aggressive and negative words allowed on public networks.

Although I wanted to say that his name was Shim Kyungtaek, it was still a little satisfying mentioning him on a public network since all I could do last time I went to him was threaten him.

Still, since we were already screwing him over, why not screw him over to our hearts’ content?

I tossed another comment for the indignant cast to bite on.

“I looked into it because Songha wasn’t so terrible at acting to listen to such words and found that the teacher held unpleasant feelings towards her.”

“Really? Wow, complete trash!”

“There are people who can’t stand others becoming successful. Still, as someone who calls himself a teacher, really. I don’t know who he is, but what a worthless man.”

While inwardly smiling, I observed the commotion. It was no different from a hazing. If there was an object known as ‘acting teacher’ here, it would already be rolling around in tatters on the set.

After cursing him for a while, the cast members spoke words of encouragement to Lee Songha. Once this story went on air, it would undoubtedly become a hot topic. This was why we were leaking this before the Cat Guardian Ghost fever was over.

It would definitely be a positive influence on Lee Songha’s image.

And it would screw Teacher Shim Kyungtaek over.

I wasn’t certain why the company told us to leak this on the broadcast. They might have taken measures so that Teacher Shim Kyungtaek couldn’t bring Son Chaeyoung down with him or CEO Baek Hansung had some other thoughts.

However, what was certain was that, even if the press didn’t directly expose Teach Shim Kyungtaek’s name, this would be a publicly known fact to those in the know. If that happens, he wouldn’t be able to go around acting arrogantly and being called a professor like now.

Also, he would become more nervous the more famous Lee Songha became. Whenever Lee Songha’s name was mentioned in the press, he would be trembling in fear in case his past would resurface along with it.

“Then it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that your manager changed your life.”

It seemed like he thought this was enough as Hong Sukwoo asked this to wrap up the situation.

Lee Songha nodded her head with shining eyes.

“Yes, that’s right. If it wasn’t for oppa, I wouldn’t have done the drama and known that acting was this fun.”

Even after the large commotion passed, the recording continued.

The MCs asked me a few more annoying questions. Especially Park Taepyeong, he kept coming back to me and asking me questions like a bird that had found a bird feeder. Of course, it was good since it would increase our airtime, but my palm already felt like a pincushion.

Just as we got rid of those god-forsaken lie detectors, Hong Sukwoo abruptly looked at the celebrities and shouted,

“Now, who know their manager’s birthday? If you know, raise your hand!”

Around half of them raised their hands.

Lee Songha did as well.

She raised her hand so quickly that it surprised Im Seoyoung, who was sitting next to her.

“Ms. Lee Songha, you were the quickest! Do you know his birthday?”

“Yes. July 22.”

Lee Songha replied without a moment of hesitation.

“Manager Jung Sunwoo, is she right?”

“… Yes, she is.”

At my words, Lee Songha smiled with a proud expression.

But how did she know my birthday? Did I ever tell her?

While I was tilting my head, Hong Sukwoo listened to the replies of other celebrities. Then Park Taepyeong smirked as he said,

“There are definitely those who prepared for logic quizzes since we told them that there would be a quiz corner, but you’ve done quizzes on common sense, capital cities, and stuff a lot on other shows. That’s why we won’t be doing them.”

Oh my.

While protests erupted here and there, I checked Im Seoyoung's condition first. She looked like someone who had lost their country. As if comforting her, Lee Taehee, who was sitting next to her, patted her shoulder.

"We are going to quiz you about your manager. Although it's a given that managers know a lot about their celebrities, we need to check how much celebrities know about their managers in return!"

The cast members' eyes gleamed. Should I say they reminded me of goldfish that barely managed to reach the surface after fighting each other for food? Also, among those goldfish were Neptune goldfish. Of course, the goldfish who looked like she was overflowing with eagerness was Lee Songha.

The MCs looked at their cue cards as they began the quiz.

"Who knows their manager's hobby?"

Once again, Lee Songha's hand shot up.

"Watching movies and dramas."

"Who knows their manager's nickname during school?"

“Jung Jumma.”

Goldfish Lee Songha didn’t stop. It was so bad that Park Taepyeong, with a tired expression, told Lee Songha that it would be better if she just kept her hand up in the air until the end.

“Who knows their manager’s zodiac sign?”

The four of them answered this question together.

Our team was in the lead. It was good. It was good since it meant they were interested in me, but this situation where we were beating those who worked together for years was a bit baffling.

The other cast members looked dumbfounded, especially Kim Dongho, who was sitting next to me. The look he gave me when he glanced at me hadn’t been pleasant for a while now.

“Hey, Neptune’s too good at this.”

“It’s Ms. Lee Songha who’s too good. Isn’t it to the point it feels like they’re family?”

“Lastly, a chance to turn the tables! We’ll do a 50-point bonus question. The most shocking team wins this. Who knows their manager’s embarrassing or dark past?”

What?

Amongst the people shouting, I quickly found Lee Songha.

Fortunately, her hand was still. Just as I was relieved that her expression read, ‘Dark past? He doesn’t have something like that,’ LJ raised her hand out of nowhere and said,

“I saw him practice smiling by himself while looking at a mirror before.”

… When did she see that?

My face burned. It felt like the cast members and even the staff members were staring at my face. When I glanced at Kim Hyunjo, his lips were stretched up to his ears. If he wasn’t on set, his expression said that he would be rolling on the floor laughing.

Fortunately, thanks to the other cast members bringing up darker pasts, my trivial story was quickly buried under them. I was paying sharp attention to them in case one of them raised their hand, but Im Seoyoung kept glancing my way.

Then, in the end, she avoided my gaze and stealthily raised her hand.

What? What? What does she know?

“Euaah, oppa, I have no choice for the points! Th-there are things

in life that just can't be helped!"

"No, Seoyoung. There isn't anything that can't be helped."

I tried to calm Im Seoyoung down.

Park Taepyeong and Hong Sukwoo were giggling in front of me and the cast members and staff were laughing at our back-and-forth for a while now, but it was more urgent to stop Im Seoyoung from spouting whatever bomb she was about to.

"We're going to lose like this!"

"I'll buy you that damn beef! I don't know what it is, but don't say it."

My family is going to be watching this!

*

In the beginning, the mood of the staff was as though they were in a funeral home.

Producer Yoon aged in real time as he watched the managers in total confusion, unable to get a sense of the broadcast.

When the title of the broadcast was 'Star Manager' and the

majority of the managers talked as though they were reading from a Korean textbook, continuing like this would undoubtedly result in failure. It might even be picked as the worst program among the Lunar New Year's specials each broadcast company had ambitiously prepared for.

However, it was different now.

Producer Yoon and Writer Park were looking at the set with smiling faces.

"Wow, I was worried we might have to edit this whole part out, but it was revived."

"I know, right? When we go record outside, we should add another cameraman to that team."

"I didn't hope for much besides Lee Songha's story, but I didn't know their chemistry with each other was so good. I had thought that I should at least insert a bunch of their reactions if they can't get any airtime, but doesn't it seem like they'll be cast for a ton of entertainment programs when this airs?"

At Producer Yoon's words, Writer Park replied while rubbing her chin,

"But, it seems like that a lot of it is because of the manager?"

Don't know if you remember, but his nickname is a combination of his name (Jung Sunwoo) and Ahjumma (Korean word for an

older woman)

Chapter 80: Star Manager (4)

"Ah, he's definitely okay, that manager."

Producer Yoon said as he turned his gaze towards the managers.

Manager Jung Sunwoo immediately caught his eye amongst the bland managers. It seemed he was still shocked by the reveal of his dark past as he was rubbing his face. Even this grabbed people's attention.

Writer Park looked in the same direction and smiled.

"He's better than okay, he's very good. The majority of the remarks Neptune made that I think we should keep are ones that are from a back-and-forth with their manager."

"Now that I think about it, that's true."

"He gives off a completely different feeling. At first, their comments were typical as if they had memorized them night after night, but once their manager joined in, they became much livelier."

At first, there was no doubt that the expressions Neptune had were those of rookies. They were okay with it though as they didn't hold many expectations for a new girl group that didn't have a lot of experience appearing on entertainment shows.

The role they expected Neptune to take was to tell the story behind Lee Songha's controversies, which their viewers would be interested in, and to catch the viewers' attention with their pretty looks amongst the group of males. This was all.

If they hoped for a little more, it was that their chemistry with their manager was entertaining.

However, it was beyond what they had expected.

Like Writer Park said, their manager had a great influence on this current good mood.

Whirling a permanent marker in her hand, Writer Park said,

"There are tons of rookies who are overenthusiastic and go overboard, but they are doing fine. They speak well, and their tone and pronunciation are good that we can hear them clearly. Which is why our eyes keep looking in their direction."

"This really, I almost can't even look at the ones I held expectations for with open eyes, but we got lucky with people we didn't hold any expectations for."

"I know, right? What would we have done if we didn't cast them at the last minute."

"Thinking of it makes me dizzy. I might have even opened up a bottle of soju in the editing room."

The people they had expected do better than average were flopping one after another, especially Kim Dongho, who had been an aspiring comedian. He tested the MCs' patience with his terrible jokes, which felt like a chilling wind. Park Taepyeong even stopped talking to him a while ago.

Producer Yoon licked his lips and said,

"If they can continue like this outdoors, then there's nothing more I could want from them."

"I think Mr. Taepyeong is going to look after them. Can't we be hopeful?"

"Look after them? Not Mr. Sukwoo, but Senior Taepyeong?"

At his tone that seemed to ask if she had made a mistake, Writer Park just shrugged. She looked at Jung Sunwoo and Park Taepyeong, who was giggling next to him.

"He looks after good rookies like he said. To me, it looks like Mr. Taepyeong really likes Manager Jung Sunwoo."

*

As soon as they finished filming in the studio, people began to move en-masse.

The staff and the cast cleaned up the studio and gathered outside for the outdoor shoot. The forecast kept saying there would be a cold wave, and it really was damn cold. When I sighed, steam flowed out from my mouth. It reminded me of how I felt about my soul.

With a faint smile, I asked the camerawoman filming me,

“The dark past part from before, can we edit that out?”

“Nope. Even if I were the main producer, I’d keep it.”

I thought that would be the case since the main producer came up to me with his lips curved up to his ears and gave me a ton of encouragement. He said something about how, if I continued like this, I would receive casting calls for entertainment shows.

It wasn’t welcome news at all.

Afterwards, Im Seoyoung poked my shoulder. With an expression that looked like a criminal on her way to exile or a puppy that had just made an enormous mistake, she blinked her round eyes. If she had a tail, it would droop down to the ground.

The cameraman assigned to Neptune stuck his camera in and filmed this scene.

“Oppa, oppa.”

“What, what?”

When I replied nonchalantly, Im Seoyoung’s complexion brightened.

“I really, truly think my mouth has gone crazy. I had a mental breakdown when they said there would be no logic quiz, and since victory was dangling in front of my eyes because Lee Songha was doing so well, I felt a sense of urgency. I felt like something bad would happen if we lost or something. Euaah, oppa, are you okay?”

“Of course, I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, in front of the camera.”

“… What if there isn’t a camera?”

I glanced at the camera before saying gloomily,

“Seoyoung, if I die when I go back home for Lunar New Year’s Day, the cause of death would be out of embarrassment. I’ll ask that they bury you alive in my grave.”

“Oh my god!”

Im Seoyoung crouched down. It looked like her soul had drifted off and only paper-thin husk remained, fluttering in her place. After watching her like this for a few seconds, I patted her hunched shoulders.

“I’m joking, you can stick your head back out.”

“For real this time? It’s for real, right?”

“I’ll just take a doll instead of you.”

“Ah, oppa!”

Full of energy once again, Im Seoyoung slapped my shoulder.

The other members had expressions that they expected this and laughed.

I secretly checked the cameramen’s expressions. Since the studio, Im Seoyoung’s current self was quite close to her normal self. To me, it looked like she was giving off a favorable expression, but that might be because I was like a hedgehog parent.

Wondering how others looked at her, my worries sneaked up before subsiding.

The lips of the cameramen, who were looking at Im Seoyoung, were curled upwards. Also, their eyes gave off the nice impression of an unni and oppa.

On the pavement where good-looking vans were lined up outside the broadcasting company.

Passengers were already present in the van we were to ride. Jang Noksu and Kim Dongho were planning out the comments they would give each other and the reactions they would make. It was almost like a rehearsal.

When we approached, Kim Dongho gave me a displeased look. He was acting like this for a while now. Well, I didn't really care about glances like his since I received plenty of them while going around with Neptune. Just, I didn't know why he was acting like that.

Did he think my reactions were too soft and he didn't like them?

However, those were the best reactions I could make when his jokes could even make time and space curl up. When the cast and the MCs shuddered at his jokes, wouldn't it be weirder if I alone gave him a standing ovation?

Whatever the reason, since it looked like I was the junior here, I cleared my throat and said,

"I'll driv-"

“No, you can’t.”

Park Taepyeong suddenly came out behind me.

“You heard the rules in the studio. As soon as you get in the van, your positions are switched. Celebrities become managers and managers become celebrities.”

As he said this, he handed us name tags. My name was on the name tags Neptune received, and all four of their names were on mine.

This meant I need to act like all four of them by myself. I was going to be busy.

When I looked at the girls to see what they were up to, they had their heads pressed against each other and were whispering amongst each other.

Park Taepyeong looked around as he said,

“Since Mr. Jung Sunwoo and Mr. Kim Dongho are celebrities here, eliminated, since I’m the MC, eliminated, which means one of the remaining people has to drive.”

“Uh, are you going to ride with us?”

When Kim Dongho happily asked, Park Taepyeong nodded his

head.

“Since we’re going anyways, I decided to go with the team that looked like they’ll get a lot of airtime.”

“Thank you! We prepared a few more jokes so could yo-!”

“Don’t do them! It’s already cold, I’ll freeze to death!”

After shouting, Park Taepyeong placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Also, it’s not your team, but his.”

At his additional words, Kim Dongho’s expression crumbled.

The team that seemed like they would get a lot of airtime. This was the evaluation we received from the great Park Taepyeong, who was known to be as prickly as sandpaper. Although I expected this when the staff’s reactions became excessively positive and when Kim Hyunjo’s smiling face grew wider, this was really a great start.

Jang Noksu took the wheel. He had no choice since we couldn’t let the girls drive.

As she made her way to the backmost seat, Im Seoyoung mumbled,

“I have a driver’s license too. I got one just for situations like this.”

“No, put it away. Yours isn’t for driving but a form of ID. If you drive, our closing scene will be at a police station or an emergency hospital.”

Being the last person, I was about to get in when the van suddenly burst into laughter. Park Taepyeong was holding his belly as he laughed. It wasn’t because he was aware of the cameras installed in the van, but he was laughing for real.

I almost slipped when I tried to get in because of the girls’ expressions sitting at the back together.

They all had their mouths firmly shut and were straining their eyes. They were doing their best to make frowning faces. Park Taepyeong was laughing out loud as he said something about how they should go get a refund with those faces.

I opened and closed my mouth before asking,

“What are you doing?”

“We are imitating oppa’s face.”

It seemed she was trying to hold her laughter as Im Seoyoung’s lips trembled when she talked.

“Do you have a grudge against me? When did I ever make a face like that?”

“Look at a mirror.”

LJ replied. Then, as if she just remembered, she looked in a mirror and smiled.

“I need to practice smiling.”

“I need to practice too.”

Im Seoyoung enthusiastically joined in.

I looked at them dumbfounded when Lee Taehee directed her phone at me.

“I need to take this.”

She said as she took a picture. Her eyes were smiling.

Even more excited, Im Seoyoung gave her a tip.

“Unni, you can’t take a good picture. The pictures oppa takes look like they were taken with his feet.”

Stop it!

While these words made their way up my throat, what left my mouth was a sigh. Still astonished, I got in the van. Park Taepyeong looked at me amongst the girls, who were still making frowning faces, and laughed even louder. That man was going to throw up if he kept laughing like that.

Just then, someone leaned in from behind me.

Fortunately, it was Lee Songha this time.

Just as I relaxed from being worried about what it would be now, Lee Songha's forehead wrinkled as she said,

"When you get in a car, you need to put on your seatbelt."

Following this, it was a complete mess.

Throughout the time we were on the road and when the recording continued afterwards, the girls enthusiastically imitated me, and in order to repay them, I put my heart into acting like the four of them by myself.

Should I say it was like, if one side threw a bomb, then the other would launch a missile, which led to the first side launching an atomic bomb? In the end, what I was saying was that both sides were completely beaten up.

It was such a mess that I wondered if it would be okay for the broadcast, but people's reactions were good. The camerawoman following me kept mumbling that there was nothing to cut out.

Yeah, if the broadcast ended up being entertaining, and if Neptune's first time on a public network was a success, then we had pretty much attained our goal. My image, that had just gone through a blender, well, like always, it would momentarily be talked about before quieting down. It would. It must.

Anyways, what remained after the recording were the staff's warm smiles.

Park Taepyeong's empty promise, telling Neptune that he would cast them on his weekend entertainment show and to bring me along with them.

Also, some memories that would make me kick my blanket at night.

Ah, right. One more thing.

We got the winning prize, a top-quality beef set.

A few days after the entertainment recording that felt like it would forever remain in my dark past.

As a reward for appearing on the entertainment show, that day finally arrived.

A day that made me feel as though I was on the same level as dragons and mermaids. The day that would come only if I forgot about it. The day that made me rage as it disappeared like a mirage multiple times before.

It was a break.

I had prepared a perfect plan two days ahead of time for this day.

First, I would watch a movie early in the morning then have simple lunch near the theatre. After watching a second and third movie, I would have dinner and recover myself with a cup of coffee. Finally, I planned on watching the most anticipated blockbuster.

Just thinking about it made my heart ache with happiness.

While humming, I bought a coffee and popcorn. Then I joined the group of people who came as couples or friends and got on the elevator.

Enjoying a movie by yourself was the best. Of course, of course.

To be honest, I didn’t have any friends who would watch four movies in a day with me.

“I’ll check your ticket.”

“Thank you.”

The theatre employee’s normal greeting sounded like an angel playing the bugle.

I showed her my mobile ticket. After checking that I had four movie tickets at different times, the employee looked at me as if wondering what kind of person I was.

I entered the multiplex with light steps. A mobile communications ad was playing on the screen. I sat in the seat which was like the nest for my soul and took out my phone.

Should I set it to silent or vibrate? Although Kim Hyunjo told me to rest easy as he would absolutely not call me today no matter what happened, too many unavoidable incidents occurred in the life of a manager.

If I set it to vibrate, I thought I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on the movie because I was concerned that I might have received a call. I set it was the quietest vibrate setting and was about to put it in my pocket when it vibrated.

I felt an ominous feeling that I shouldn’t check what it was.

No, there was no way the world would be so cruel to me.

While hoping it was spam, I stared at my phone screen. I still had hope when I saw the number started with a 02, but damn it, the middle numbers were familiar. Although I didn't know which team it was, it was from work.

"Hello?"

Thinking about it for a few seconds, I went out towards the door and answered the phone.

I heard an unfamiliar woman's voice.

-Is this Manager Jung Sunwoo? I'm sorry for calling you on your break.

You just needed to tell me trivial matters and hang up within a minute.

"What is it? Did Neptun-"

-No, it's not about Neptune. This is Team 2, but it looks like we need to you cover for someone today. Our team leader said he would personally talk to Team 3 so you just need to go pick her up right now.

As expected, I didn't have a good feeling.

I barely contained my urge to go, ‘Bzzz, bzz, sorry, I can’t hear you,’ and hang up. There were so many employees in the company, but why did they need to pass on a schedule to someone who was on his break for a change?

First, I should call Kim Hyunjo and ask what-

-Chief Jo will call you and explain in more detail.

Wait, who? Chief Jo?

With a feeling of having watched a horror movie, I asked,

“… The schedule I’m covering for, who’s it for?”

-Ms. Son Chaeyoung.

This is referencing an idiom, ‘Even hedgehogs love their children’, meaning parents will always think their children are great.

Chapter 81: Star Manager (5)

"Who?"

-Ms. Son Chaeyoung.

Just what was happening? Why did this name come up?

I thought it was weird for Team 2 to ask me, who was a part of Team 3 and was also on a break for a change, to cover for them, but did Son Chaeyoung choose me?

A chill swept through me. It was better when she wanted to take me down, it was more spine-chilling now that she was trying to take me away.

The future I had seen last time suddenly crossed my mind.

The future where I was Son Chaeyoung's manager. The one that was a risk to my mental health.

I wasn't certain whether that future changed since I rejected her proposal or not. There was no way I could know why I became assigned to Son Chaeyoung with what I had seen.

However, it felt like if I accepted to cover for them, I would get closer to that future. It wasn't only my break that would be wasted, I felt like my happy life plans would go to waste as well.

I placed my phone next to my ear then further away as I said,

“Hello, hello? I think it’s because I’m in the elevator, but I can’t hear you very well. I’ll call you back when I get off.”

-Pardon? Hello?

I hung up and called Kim Hyunjo.

He didn’t answer. It was the same for the team 3 leader.

Were they together? Were they in the middle of a meeting?

The more I thought about it, the weirder it seemed. They knew about my relationship with Son Chaeyoung well enough. If there was a situation where I would have to cover for Son Chaeyoung’s schedule, there was no way they wouldn’t tell me. I even thought that perhaps they didn’t know what was going on.

First, I sent a text to Kim Hyunjo then racked my brain.

What sort of excuse should I tell the Team 2 employee? Should I tell her I was aching with pain? Or that I went to the countryside to meet my parents? Or should I-

I called someone.

She was someone who always answered the phone as if she had been waiting for it, but the ringtone rang longer than usual today. I was waiting for her while I was tapping on the floor with my heel when I heard her drowsy voice.

-Oppa? Is it you?

“Yeah, Songha. Sorry, did you wake up because of me?”

-No, I’m awake.

Her voice brightened. I also heard the rustling sounds of her getting out of bed. I could picture her in my head. She probably had her phone right next to her ear with a dazed expression.

“Do you have anything going on today? Or are you busy?”

-Nope. I was going to practice for tomorrow’s shoot, but I don’t have to. I already practiced a lot.

“Really? I have to make up some excuse to see you, are sick or anything?”

After a moment of silence, Lee Songha said.

-I suddenly feel like I’m going to throw up.

From the other side of the phone, I heard a retching sound.

I refunded my movie tickets and used that money to buy chicken.

Then I fled to Neptune's residence.

When I explained the situation to the Team 2 employee, I could tell she was flustered. It felt like she wanted to say something, but what could she do? I had to take care of Lee Songha, who I was assigned to, over covering for someone.

When I sighed, saying that I was worried since we had to go to film tomorrow morning, she was at a loss for words.

After I arrived at their residence, I received a call from Kim Hyunjo, and as expected, he was in a meeting. It was a meeting with Team 2. Apparently, the team 2 leader brought up the matter of covering for Son Chaeyoung after the meeting.

He said something about how Chief Jo looked favorably upon me so he wanted to give me a chance and how he would make up for making me work on my break by giving me a break later. Since the team 2 leader kept spouting nonsense about how there was no problem, the two team leaders were fighting.

If I had gone to pick up Son Chaeyoung after the call, there was a 100% chance that I would have been told to cover for Chief Jo since I was already there.

Kim Hyunjo said that today was a disaster and acknowledged me taking refuge. Also, he said that I would get another day off soon.

“I think the refugee situation ended. So you can stop now.”

Lee Songha, who was lying in bed breathing softly, turned her head. It was sad just looking at her reddened cheeks and her soaked forehead. I felt like I had to take her to the emergency right away.

I felt this way even though I knew her hot cheeks were because of the electric blanket beneath her covers and the cold sweat on her forehead was because Im Seoyoung had sprayed her with a spray bottle.

“Is it over? You don’t have to leave anymore?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“If this happens again, come over.”

“Okay. I get it so get up. You don’t have to do this. No one’s going to come check on you so there’s no need for you to act so realistically. You look like I really need to feed you rice porridge.”

“Oppa, you know how to make rice porridge?”

“Of course, I do. Why? You want some?”

She had been about to get up while wiping her forehead when she looked like she was going to lie back down.

“I’m kidding. I bought chicken. Aren’t you going to eat chicken?”

“Ah.”

She was considering it. Now really, what was there to consider?

I dragged Lee Songha, who looked a little regretful, out to the living room. I thought I had heard bustling noises outside the door, but they had already set the table with food, the chicken in the middle.

Sitting on the sofa she always sat on, Im Seoyoung sighed as she said,

“Oppa, your break has been ruined again. We really need to move up in this damn world.”

“I know, right?”

“Oh, right. Oppa, oppa, you know the entertainment show we were on? Won’t the company make you do this and that if you get really popular from it?”

“I’m fine so you get popular first.”

At my words, Im Seoyoung’s complexion became dark. She went around in circles like a puppy who had to go to the washroom before tightly hugging a cushion lying on the sofa and saying,

“Euaah, I’m already scared to death. My entire family’s going to watch it when I go back home for Lunar New Year’s Day! They’ll definitely have high expectations for me. But what do I do if everything was cut out because it wasn’t funny?”

“Don’t worry. The producer said it would be funny even if he edited it with his toes.”

“How can oppa be so calm?! You said your family is going to watch it too!”

“Just give up thinking about it. It’s easier if you just forget about it.”

I set aside such useless thoughts and was concerned about how many days I would rest during the long weekend. With Kim Hyunjo’s schedule as the focus, we were trying to free up as much time as we could for the long weekend, but this broadcasting industry wasn’t a place that rested when others did so it was almost impossible for us to take a break the entire long weekend.

“What are you girls going to do during the long weekend?”

I asked the other girls.

Lee Songha, who was sitting near my leg eating chicken, was the first to reply.

“I’m going home too. My dad said he’ll come pick me up.”

“That’s good.”

“We’re going to watch Star Manager together too.”

Although it was faint, her voice definitely contained traces of excitement.

She said her parents didn’t like her being a celebrity, asking why she kept doing something that wasn’t working out. Now their thoughts that ‘this wasn’t working out’ would change as well since the current Lee Songha was a big celebrity.

Lee Taehee, who had already opened a can of beer, said,

“I’m just going to stay here. I don’t have anywhere to go.”

“What? Why don’t you? What about your home?”

“My parents are going on a vacation. I’m just going to catch up on my sleep during the long weekend.”

What a surprise. I thought that something had happened at her home.

“A girl who sleeps wherever she rests her head needs to catch up on sleep? Are you going to go on hibernation?”

Relieved, I said jokingly and Lee Taehee smiled while drinking beer.

LJ, who had been fiddling with the remote control, said,

“I’ll be here too. It’s not such an amazing day that I have to go to the States for it.”

Ah, LJ’s parents were in the States.

Still, I thought it might be lonely if only the two of them remained, but LJ suddenly smiled strangely.

“I’ll just exercise. Well, if I really get bored, I’ll go play in Im Seoyoung’s room.”

“What?! Hey, no way! What are you planning on doing in my room! I’m going to lock my door before I go!”

“I can pick that in three seconds.”

“You-you’re lying, right? You joking again, right?!”

Im Seoyoung shouted, threatening her about going in her room. She had been digging a hole just now, worried that the entertainment special would flop, but it seemed she had forgotten all about it because of LJ. LJ was also enjoying herself while she poked fun at Im Seoyuoung.

They didn’t really look they would get along with each other but they did.

On one side, it was noisy as usual, and on the other, their leader just watched over them as though they were children while drinking her beer. The youngest was eating enthusiastically before handing me a chicken wing.

In this familiar space, I simply grinned.

Suddenly, LJ said,

“Ah, you said you didn’t get to watch any movies. You have two choices.”

“Choices?”

LJ waved the remote.

“One, watching a new movie on IPTV. Two, we binge watch Mermaid out of Water from the first episode. I think it’ll be worth watching that.”

We unanimously chose option 2. It was a great choice.

I laughed so hard that I relieved my stress.

In the end, it wasn’t a bad, no, it was quite a good break.

We got three days and two nights for our long weekend.

It was shorter than the official long weekend, but even this would have been impossible if we didn’t slave away on the phone. Kim Hyunjo and I promised to not look for each other unless the sky was collapsing or something.

The day my long weekend began, I got up early in the morning and left Seoul.

Even though the traffic congestion was severe on the highway, I didn’t get annoyed and even started humming.

The further away I got from Seoul and the closer I got to my family, the lighter my heart felt. It was the ropes which had bound me were cut one by one.

How long had it been since I felt this sensation of freedom?

Long after I left the inner city, long after I passed the high-rises that were getting rarer and rarer, and long after I drove down the dirt country roads where the farmland was barren because it was winter, I arrived in the town my parents resided in.

Maybe it was because I was an unfamiliar face, but the townspeople gave me strange looks.

I parked my car and entered my parent's house. In the flowerbed on one side of the yard was still the fake tree the quadruplets had planted on Christmas, and beside it, a shaggy dog was sleeping in its doghouse, unaware that a person had come.

It seemed my brother's family had already arrived as even the yard was bustling with noise.

"I'm home."

As soon as I opened the door, the smell of Korean pancakes welcomed me. Also, four round figures gathered around and stuck next to me. One on my stomach, one on my back, and one on each arm.

"Uncle!"

"Yes, my children."

I felt purified. I patted each head, and the third, Kaeul, smiled mischievously.

“Why are we uncle’s children? When we are our dad’s children?”

“Let’s forget about the biological factors. I took care of you half the time.”

“No, you didn’t. We grew up by ourselves.”

“This is why they say there’s no use being good to your nieces and nephews. Do you know how many of your toys I bought with my part-time job salary? I bought a ton of stuff to eat but I guess I’ll eat it all by myself. You guys have no right to eat what I brought.”

Only then did they seem aware of the shopping bags in my hands as they scrambled to change their words.

“No, I want to be uncle’s kid!”

“Me too!”

Like that, they flapped around like chicks asking for food.

I passed the kids the shopping bags and greeted my other family members. My brother and sister-in-law were the same as ever. My brother, who was reading a book on the sofa, took off his glasses

and smiled.

“I might end up forgetting your face.”

“If you think it’s getting dangerous, just look at father. I look the same as him.”

My father, who was eating a pear my sister-in-law had peeled for him, frowned. My sister-in-law and my mom laughed, their shoulders shaking.

I looked at them while I unpacked, and it seemed that the countryside suited them as my parents’ complexions were a lot better than when they were living in Seoul.

My mom touched my face as she sighed.

“Just look at how much weight you lost. Are all managers this busy? I thought I had lost one of my children.”

“For someone who just got in a company, he has to work hard if he wants to settle in.”

My mom gave a disapproving look when my father said this.

While eating a pear, I suddenly remembered and looked through my bag. Then I took out a stiff piece of paper I had put in an envelope.

“Father, here.”

“What’s this?”

“Mrs. Jang Yoonok’s autograph.”

I got her to write my father’s name and about how she wished for his complete recovery. My father, who didn’t smile much, had a smile hanging from his lips. I handed my mom and my sister-in-law each an autograph of Seo Jijoon. Looking at their reactions, it was a success. Seo Jijoon was effective regardless of age.

Just then, my brother smiled brightly as he said,

“But Sunwoo, I heard you’re appearing on TV?”

“That’s right. Ah, what was it? Star Manager? I heard you’re appearing on that. You should have told us. We only learned about this after hearing it from mother-in-law.”

At my sister-in-law’s words, I turned my gaze towards my mom.

My mom waved her hands as she said,

“I only told daughter-in-law.”

“Hey, Sunwoo, are you appearing on TV?”

“It ended up that way, uncle.”

“Sunwoo! I heard you’re appearing on TV? Eldest brother was worried whether you being a manager would be okay, but if you’re appearing on TV, aren’t you a success? But do all managers appear on TV nowadays?”

“I just happened to go on once, aunt.”

“Sunwoo, are you really appearing on TV? Star, Star, what was it?”

“Star Manager. I wish it was a lie.”

“Sunwoo, are you-!”

“Yes, I am.”

I had expected this.

My mom only told my sister-in-law, my sister-in-law only told someone else, and that someone else only told someone else.

As the start of the special broadcast approached, my uncle’s family and even my aunts’ families, who went to their in-laws

early before coming here, gathered at my parents' house.

The living room was bustling with people.

IPTV – Internet Protocol Television. Like 'video on demand'.

There are a variety of Korean pancakes, but mainly frying vegetable in batter to form flat discs. There are versions with seafood, etc.

I'm going to romanize their names so it's less weird, but his name is Kaeul (가을) which means fall/autumn in Korean. Guess what the other kids' names are?

Chapter 82: Star Manager (6)

Those who liked alcohol drank, leaving the meat pancakes and pollack pancakes on top of the platform table alone, and those who didn't drink, including the quadruplets, ate fruits as they all waited for the TV commercial to end.

Of course, the topic of conversation on both sides was me.

"Sunwoo, if there were things like this, you shouldn't have hidden it and told me right away. I almost missed it without knowing. Why? Did you not do well during the recording? Were you stuttering and trembling on TV?"

"But he isn't the type to go somewhere and tremble, you know?"

"Also, all the weird parts would have been edited out anyways, right?"

"All broadcasts are like that. Don't tell me you were completely edited out and you only show up for a few seconds?"

I emptied my heart and slouched deep into the sofa.

My older cousin, who was the latest to arrive, said,

"Ah, but eldest uncle set up the parking space outside, right? Some bad-mannered person parked his car there. A white minivan.

Completely new. It's not one of ours, right?"

"That's mine."

My cousin's eyes widened at my words.

"You drove it here? Is it a company car? Hey, then is it a celebrity's?"

"No, it's mine."

This time, it wasn't just my cousin, other people's eyes widened as well.

"What? It hasn't been that long since you've started working and you bought a car already?"

"An installment plan? You bastard, you got some guts. You're gonna break your back paying that off!"

"He didn't buy it, his company CEO bought it for him. For doing a good job."

My mom said abruptly. It seemed she still felt uneasy that I received a car as her expression wasn't good. Well, it wasn't only my mom who was like this. My brother and sister-in-law repeatedly told me it was strange and advised me to look into it.

My cousin dragged his butt over towards me.

“Your company CEO bought you a car? Is your CEO a woman?”

“What are you thinking? He’s a middle-aged man.”

“Then it’s even weirder? No matter how great of a job you do, instead of giving you a bonus or a raise, he gave a new employee a car? What kind of person is he?”

What kind of person was CEO Baek Hansung?

With the sweet persimmon the quadruplets brought me in my mouth, I mumbled,

“He’s someone a lot of managers consider a role model.”

To be honest, I thought the same before I met him, but after joining and interacting with him, everything about CEO Baek Hansung left a deeper impression on me. Should I say he was like the ideal ‘CEO’ I had imagined?

I had momentarily been lost in my thoughts when reality washed over me like a tsunami.

“Quiet! It’s starting, it’s starting!”

The title ‘Star Manager’ filled the TV screen.

The living room, which had been noisy as a marketplace, instantly became quiet. Even the quadruplets lined up in front of the TV and widened their already round eyes with the intent of finding me on the screen.

The jib operator swept over the studio with an overlooking shot.

On the managers’ side, it seemed like it should swipe past me when it caught me in a close-up.

“Oh my, brother. It’s Sunwoo, Sunwoo! There’s Sunwoo over there!”

“Wow, Jung Sunwoo! You really are on TV! But do you have makeup on?”

“Just how many celebrities are on there? Did you talk with all of them?”

With one hand tightly gripping the remote control, I replied to the outpour of questions. The broadcast was only starting but I felt parched. I glugged down my sikhye.

Then I went into a coughing fit and almost threw it all up.

The MCs were about to introduce me when an insert began to

play.

It was me sitting at a company desk, diligently adjusting the schedule. There was no one with me. It was just me talking into my phone alone. Then I crossed my arms together and nodded in front of the whiteboard.

It was the so-called setup shot for my profile.

“Wow, uncle is freaking cool! Is that W&U? Is Blackout there too?”

“Sunwoo, when you’re like that, you look like a different person. You look quite the part?”

“Is that your office? Are there nice female employee there?”

“Just let him be. Sunwoo might even marry a celebrity.”

Please let this just pass.

Please. Quickly.

They went through other people’s introductions really quickly, but why was mine so long?

Lastly, they showed a group picture of me with Neptune and a

picture of Lee Songha clinging on my back, which I had no doubt the PR Team gave them. The living room erupted into a commotion once more. It was noisier than during the World Cup.

Alternating between the TV and my phone, I focused on monitoring the broadcast.

Although I didn't want to think about work when I had come down to my parents' home for the long weekend, my desire was surging right now. I felt like I had to work if I wanted to endure this for an entire hour.

It seemed that IBC worked hard to promote the program. There were quite a few viewers uploading comments as they watched the broadcast.

To be honest, I was worried how they would deal with the overall crisis, but after seeing the broadcast, it seemed I was worried for nothing.

They didn't call producers 'producers' for nothing.

They added a sufficient amount of comments by the celebrities and did their best to liven up the disordered managers with captions and through editing.

Park Taepyeong mumbling about how the program would flop like this and the celebrities were at a loss for words as they saw how their managers behaved, adding these reactions enriched the

fun. It was to the point it made me expectant of the viewers' reactions.

First of all, the reactions at home were explosive.

Thrilled, the quadruplets clung to my arms and legs and pled,

"Uncle, can I tell others at school that you were on TV?"

"Me too! Can I tell them that the quadruplets you mentioned were us?"

Of course, the adults were thrilled as well.

"Oh my, look at him. Oh, gosh. Why is he so funny?"

"Hey, it's strange that someone I know is on TV making me laugh!

"Isn't Sunwoo appearing a lot? Isn't he appearing more than celebrities?"

However, this excitement filled with this positivity changed once Lee Songha's story began.

After steadily setting up the kindling by talking about the controversies that came up since she was cast for the drama and

the process she underwent to overcome them and become an ‘icon of unanticipated surprise’, she poured embers and oil all over it at the end.

The verbal abuse she received from her acting teacher.

The cast on the screen was outraged and so were my relatives sitting in the living room. In the internet site I briefly entered, an unspecified majority of viewers were criticising, saying, ‘Just where did a fool like him come from?’

It was at this moment when the reporters, who had to wait after receiving the press release due to the embargo, published their articles at once. With this much firepower, it would undoubtedly still be a hot topic after the long weekend.

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek should be with his family during the holiday too, right?

When I thought about what kind of expression he would have if he was watching this broadcast right now, I felt like I was showering in carbonated water.

My smile was reaching my ears when I felt a ticklish gaze. When I looked around, it was my father. What should I say? He was looking at me with a slightly happy face, but when our eyes met, he quickly cleared his throat and turned away.

When I looked around, it wasn’t just my father. My mom,

brother, even my relatives. They were all looking at me in a new light.

As soon as I saw the TV, I knew why.

On the screen, Songha was talking about me with glittering eyes.

“Big brother doesn’t need to worry about his second child anymore. It looks like he’s doing well.”

At my aunt’s words, my father didn’t reply and simply drank his alcohol.

With a face brighter than ever, my mom’s gaze was fixed on the TV screen. Whenever my face appeared on the screen or when the Neptune members talked about me, she drew my brother and sister-in-law closer and began discussing with them.

When looking at her like that, I felt it wasn’t that bad.

Although it was a broadcast I appeared on due to various circumstances, well, it wasn’t bad.

As soon as the manager quiz corner began, the living room became noisy again. On the set, Lee Songha and I were way ahead of the others, and the edited version reflected just that.

Every time Lee Songha raised her hand, my relatives laughed

their heads off.

Looking at my phone, the viewers' reactions were the best so far.

-Those depressed during this holiday, quickly turn on IBC! So fun!

-I'm watching it with my family as well and we're all laughing our heads off. It's great. It's the best entertainment program I've seen recently.

-I only knew Lee Songha from Neptune, but their other members have a ton of charm too. Especially their manager, he's been carrying hard for a while now.

It was great that the reactions were so explosive, but I felt troubled because it seemed like the word 'manager' was being mentioned as much as the names of Neptune's members. I hoped that it would burn well throughout the broadcast, leaving only ash afterwards, so that it would quiet down.

I was more concerned because I was contacted by various people, including my friends, who seemed to be watching the live broadcast. I was also receiving a ton from broadcast producers and reporters I was familiar with.

I was purposely not checking them so that I could once I regained some mental composure after the broadcast, but one message caught my eye. It was from Producer Go Joontae. He hadn't

contacted me personally since the casting of Seo Jijoon fell through.

Since I saw an unexpected emoticon as well, I checked it out of curiosity.

-Mr. Sunwoo! I am currently watching Star Manager's broadcast, but if I had known Mr. Sunwoo had such great entertainment senses, I would have already-

After reading this far, I turned my phone off. This guy was impossible.

Anyways, seeing as how Producer Go Joontae was behaving like this, it seemed that today's broadcast really was a success.

Just as I was thinking about how great it would be if we could nab both viewership ratings and trendiness so that Neptune's popularity could rise significantly, the mood in the living room stirred greatly.

I quickly looked at the TV. I felt it would be the case, but the MCs were asking the celebrities about their managers' dark pasts. When my mom asked what a 'dark past' was, the quadruplets chattered away, explaining it to her.

"Even if it's an entertainment show, why do they ask things like that?"

Even while saying this, my uncle's torso had already turned partly towards the TV. Although my other relatives were acting like they weren't interested, I could tell they all had their ears perked, ready to listen.

Just as LJ opened her mouth on screen, I secretly pressed the mute button.

Should I say it was my last struggle to avoid public embarrassment?

"What the? Why isn't there any sound? What did that girl just say?"

"I think someone pressed the mute button? Where's the remote? The remote!"

The people who were going through the living room looking for the remote quickly declared me as the culprit. So quick-witted. When I looked at them with narrowed eyes, they each raised their voice, asking if they were the type who would mock me after listening to my embarrassing story.

Their expressions were already prepared to mock me though.

Luckily, since there wasn't anyone taller than me, I endured while holding my hand that was holding the remote up in the air. A few were shouting about wanting to hear what was said, and others were laughing hysterically at this sight.

Then my cousin took out his phone.

“I bet someone already mentioned it on the internet?”

He said before his eyes went wide after a few taps.

Damn it, he saw it.

My aunt, who had been vigilantly targeting the remote, urged,

“Why? What is it? Just what is his dark past that’s so surprising?”

“No, that’s not the problem.”

My cousin said in a dazed voice as he looked at me.

“He’s currently ranked 1 on trending.”

Star Manager hit 11% national ratings in the end.

It was the best result out of the Lunar New Year’s Specials each channel showed off. Since the second highest barely passed 8%, we were unmatched as first. Reporters and critics said that, if this had been a pilot instead of a special, it would undoubtedly have become a regularly scheduled program.

Search terms related to the special were lined up along the search rankings. Since the broadcast felt well composed on top of being on a public network, I had held a bit of expectation for it, but it was way beyond my imagination.

Although I had expected Lee Songha to receive attention, the amount of attention on Im Seoyoung was great as well. After having checked the reactions on the internet and of those around her the next day, Im Seoyoung even called me, crying and saying that she couldn’t believe it.

Also, what was most important as that Neptune’s popularity surged.

If they had slowly built up their image as a talented girl group on Next K-Star, a competition program, then this time, they properly showed off Neptune’s charm, which they hadn’t had the opportunity to show off until now.

For something that the company employees had difficulty achieving no matter how much they racked their brains to be accomplished with one entertainment show. So this was why celebrities tried so hard to get on public network entertainment shows.

Since their value increased, a sudden change occurred.

Requests for events came in like crazy. We also received a few broadcast casting calls.

Many were looking to cast Lee Songha or Im Seoyoung, but there were also quite a few who wanted to cast Neptune as a complete group. There were big weekend public network entertainment shows which we hadn't dared to even try to appear on among them as well.

These were the happy things that occurred during the long weekend.

On the other hand, there were also troublesome matters as well.

My name was at the top of the lineup of Star-Manager-related search terms in the search rankings.

Many of those big entertainment programs who gave us a casting call, as if they were buying a '1+1' deal, wanted me to appear on the show with Neptune.

Also, damn it.

People recognized me now.

Korean Sweet Rice Drink. Also, meat pancakes and pollack pancakes are variations of Korean pancakes mentioned in the previous chapter.

Gaming term – He's doing a lot of the work. 'Carrying the team', etc.

Chapter 83: Star Manager (7)

“This is W&U’s PR Team.”

The female employee received the call with a face, which still contained traces of the aftermath of the long weekend.

-I wanted to ask for the contact information of the person in charge of Neptune to cast them on an IBC broadcast.

“Yes, please wait.”

-I would like Manager Jung Sunwoo’s number, who appeared on the Lunar New Year’s Special. It’s an entertainment show on parenting.

After telling him Jung Sunwoo’s phone number, the female employee hung up and said,

“There really are a lot of people looking for Mr. Sunwoo.”

“He’s a new face in the industry for a change. The reactions of the public are good too. Since cases like this heat up quickly before cooling down, they want to milk what they can out of it.”

The male employee shrugged. The female employee said,

“Either way, Neptune’s popularity rose because of this. The

company should give Mr. Sunwoo a bonus.”

“It looks like he might even get promoted. Since they lack personnel once Neptune members have their own schedules, Chief Kim Hyunjo said that he should recruit another manager under him.”

The female employee, who had been tapping her chin with her pen, turned her head. Beyond the partition, Team Leader Park was looking at her monitor while drinking hot coffee. She asked Team Leader Park,

“Team leader, does Mr. Sunwoo have any thoughts on going on any more entertainment shows?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like it? He probably wouldn’t have done it this time as well if it wasn’t for Neptune.”

“That’s a bit of a shame.”

Just as the female employee licked her lips, a middle-aged man entered the PR Team’s office. He wore a scarf and a coat, and his body was round like a Russian nesting doll. His balding head looked especially cold in the winter. He was the director.

Receiving the greetings of the employees, the director immediately asked Team Leader Park,

“Team Leader Park, did you hear? IBC’s Wednesday-Thursday

drama, Time Slip. Apparently, the director had an affair with the writer, and his wife came to the film set and caused a fuss?"

"Of course, I did. That's why they hastily got another writer to work with their B Team director."

"Lucky Charm was the one who brought information about how there was something going on over there, right? Just where did he hear it from?"

The female employee, who had been listening to their conversation, poked the male employee's side with her elbow.

"Cat Guardian Ghost, Mermaid out of Water, Time Slip. What Mr. Sunwoo told us in the beginning came true. This is a great story, but if Mr. Sunwoo went out on entertainment shows and talked about it... no one would believe him, right?"

The director glanced at the female employee and said,

"Of course. Right, I heard the reactions from Lucky Charm appearing on the entertainment show were good?"

"Did you not see the broadcast? Culture critics and reporters picked him as one of the biggest beneficiaries of the Lunar New Year's Specials."

"Oh, wow. He was that good? He wasn't the funny type though, was he?"

“No. From an outside perspective, he looks like someone who is a bit distant from entertainment shows, but once his character was established in that way, this gap was rather entertaining.”

The female employee slowly raised her hand.

“Should I show you? I saved a few clips that were floating around.”

The director, male employee, and Team Leader Park immediately gathered behind the female employee’s monitor. When she showed them clips regarding the lie detector and Neptune and Jung Sunwoo imitating each other, the director chuckled.

While clicking on the last video, the female employee said,

“I found this to be the funniest. While watching the broadcast, I choked on my water when this part came up.”

It was the scene where they exposed their managers’ dark past. Im Seoyoung shouted about how they might lose like this. This was followed by Jung Sunwoo, whose makeup made him seem more unfriendly-looking, trying to stop her by saying he would buy her the beef set.

When the MCs egged her on, Im Seoyoung opened her mouth.

{It was in the past. It was early in the morning so everyone was taking a nap in the van. I was the only one awake when I heard Sunwoo oppa say, ‘What should I do if aliens invade?’}

{Aliens?}

The puzzled faces of the MCs and cast were reflected on the screen. Even Jung Sunwoo didn’t look like he knew what she was talking about.

{So when I asked him, ‘Why aliens all of a sudden?’, then oppa, in a completely serious way, said, ‘Then do I have to save the Earth? Do I?’ Later on, I figured out he was talking in his sleep.}

The studio erupted into laughter. The screen once again captured Jung Sunwoo in a closeup. Although he didn’t look like he was very flustered, when the camera closed in, they could see his eyes were trembling.

{When I asked, ‘Oppa, how are you going to save the world?’ he said, ‘It’s a secret,’ before saying, ‘Hmm. I’ll never wear a Spandex suit.’}

The director burst into laughter.

*

The festive mood heated up.

The spectators gathered on the field cheered. I saw quite a few older people shouting Neptune and the members' names. I felt it was because of Star Manager. It raised their popularity in more diverse age groups.

There was only one song left in Neptune's performance. When I looked at my wristwatch, it was almost the time I had expected it would be. While I was checking the path that I should take to bring the van over, an event agency employee I was familiar with came up to me and said,

"Mr. Manager, how is Neptune's schedule these days? They are very busy, right?"

It was times like this when I felt that Neptune had truly taken off.

When the words 'Mr. Manager' came out the mouths of those who used to say, 'Hey, manager'.

When the people who used to ask, 'We cast girl groups even if they are unknown since they are good for heating up the mood at events, but don't you have more revealing outfits?' minded my reaction while asking if we were busy these days.

"Compared to before, we're very busy."

"Wow, you guys really grew suddenly. I mean, a few months ago

when I said we booked Neptune to the event organizers, they would ask who they were. But now when I tell them we booked Neptune, they are happy.”

The employee, who had been smiling friendlily as if we were close, stealthily cut the chase.

“Mr. Manager, Neptune is going to release a new song soon, right?”

“We are in the middle of recording it.”

“We should book some events before then. If their new song becomes a hit, then we probably won’t be able to book them at the current price. Even if the price increases, please go easy on us about the price adjustments.”

“We’ll have to see whe-Ah, one moment.”

My phone rang while I was talking.

“Yes, this is Jung Sunwoo.”

-Hello. I am calling about appearing on a broadcast...

The writer explained quickly as if it was a rap. It seemed the event agency employee heard what we were talking about as he distanced himself from me while smacking his lips.

I took out my notebook and wrote the title, filming schedule, broadcast concept, and the expected date. A happy smile hung on my lips as I looked at the memo filled with casting calls.

The smile, which hung on my lips, soon came back down.

-So we were hoping Mr. Manager will be able to appear on the show with Neptune.

“Me too? Is this essential?”

-We are contacting you since we thought your team would be a great fit with us after watching Star Manager. Ah, of course, we will pay you separately for your appear-

After listening to the writer’s words, I said,

“I will call you back after we check our schedule.”

After hanging up, I clicked my tongue almost out of habit.

How many times was this? The aftermath was too strong considering I only appeared on one show.

When would those people who pointed at me, saying, ‘Ah, you’re that… that,’ or people who said nonsense like ‘Do you work as a manager full-time and save the world on the side?’ disappear?

Damn it. My damn sleep talking.

It probably began not long after I obtained my future foresight ability, during the time I was wondering why I obtained such a special ability.

There definitely was a time when I was worried that perhaps aliens would invade Earth and that someone would come and say, ‘Our abilities are for the protection of Earth! Let’s go protect Earth together!’

However, I didn’t know I talked in my sleep.

If it wasn’t for Im Seoyoung, I never would have known.

Shaking my head, I turned my gaze towards the traitor. Two girls, who looked to be middle schoolers, stood hesitantly in front of the traitor.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

The traitor asked with his special smiling face. The girl who seemed to be more forward of the two was about to say something before she looked in my direction. As soon as our eyes met, she dragged her friend and came over to me.

“I’ll talk to this person!”

The traitor frowned.

I tried to smile the best I could and looked down at the girls while thinking that I should accept their request if possible for making my mood slightly better.

“Could we get autographs of Neptune unnis later?”

“Wait for a bit. I’ll get you their autographs once they get in the van.”

“Thank you!”

The girl who looked relatively more well-mannered bowed deeply.

Also, the other girl, whose lips had been twitching as if she wanted to say something, said,

“When are you going to save Earth?”

“What?”

“But I don’t think a Spandex suit is good. When you see superhero movies, they look funny no matter how great their body is. When they don’t have any muscles, it looks completely awful!”

Then she glanced over my body.

I was speechless. Was I being sexually harassed by a middle schooler?

The well-mannered girl pulled her friend's arm and whispered,

"Hey, stop it. He looks like he's getting angry."

"No, he's not. I saw the broadcast and that's his normal expression. Right? You're not angry right now, right?"

"I'm angry."

"I'm sorry!"

Their torsos folded like binders. Although I didn't know what sort of expression I had on right now, it probably wasn't good, seeing as the well-mannered girl was retreating as though she had just seen a heinous criminal.

Only after the girls left as though they were running away did the traitor strike a conversation with me.

"Sunwoo. Why don't you consider appearing on more broadcasts?"

“Just what kind of nonsense is that?”

“It’s a shame when people’s reactions are this good. You might become successful if you use this opportunity to pivot into that industry completely. It seems like it suits you?”

After the incident last time, the way the traitor treated me changed. His thick mask seemed to be slightly thinner in front of me.

While thinking about how I wanted to slap his smiling cheeks with a chicken skewer, I replied,

“I think you’ll make tons of money if you get in the pyramid scheme business, want to do it?”

I resisted calling him a scammer.

When I jokingly said that it would suit him, his expression turned strange. His mouth didn’t open again until Neptune came down from the stage.

Lee Songha came over while panting heavily. White steam spread in the air.

“I think today’s the coldest.”

“I turned the car heater on so quickly get inside and warm up.”

“Oppa should have waited in the car too. It’s cold out.”

We got the girls, who were cold as if they had taken an ice bath, into the van. Im Seoyoung, who was at the end, covered her face with both hands and tapped her feet.

“Euaaah, oppa! Cold air comes straight into our stage outfits! No joke! I thought I would freeze to death!”

“If you die, we can bury you alongside me. I’m already a corpse.”

“Di-did someone sa-“

When I nodded my head, Im Seoyoung looked like she was about to cry. She said that she would have never talked about my dark past and would rather sew her lips if she knew things would turn out this way.

After getting Im Seoyoung, who was slapping her lips, into the van, I looked around me. The girls from before were looking at me with anxious eyes from afar. When I gestured towards them, they hurriedly came over.

After leaving the girls, who were happy about receiving the autographs, behind, we left the festival event.

However, there were people gathering around us, saying that they wanted to see Neptune up close. This never happened before. Im Seoyoung readily rolled down her window and waved her hand. Cheers and sounds of pictures being taken erupted noisily.

Really, a lot of things were changing.

*

On the set of Mermaid out of Water.

The mood of this place was as depressing as a funeral. One couldn't find a trace of leisure or a smile on the faces of the staff, let alone the cast of actors.

Everyone continued the shoot without rest as if they wanted to quickly end and get out of this drama that had fallen into the mud.

In the dressing room, Son Chaeyoung scolded Chief Jo,

"When is the CEO returning to Korea?!"

"I-I told you he's arriving tomorrow."

Chief Jo continued after licking his lips,

"Chaeyoung, don't cause a fuss in front of the CEO and sit quietly

like you don't know. This is a deal that was organized by the CEO."

"Without asking me?! It's regarding the teacher! Oppa should have told me at least!"

"You don't have to worry. The team 2 leader said to handle it so that Teacher Shim Kyungtaek never mentions your name. You just need to act like you don't know..."

After glaring at Chief Jo, who was trying his best to comfort her, Son Chaeyoung looked down. Her phone in her hand was vibrating. Son Chaeyoung made Chief Jo leave the dressing room before answering the phone.

"Teacher, once the CEO arrives, I'll try to fix this incident as much as I can-"

-Fix?! Do you think this is a problem that can be fixed?!

Teacher Shim Kyungtaek shouted as his anger had reached the top of this head. It was completely different from when he was fretting before. While Son Chaeyoung had stopped speaking, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek raised his voice again.

-Is CEO Baek Hansung really overseas?! Aren't you trying to drag this on, saying that you'll fix it, before dumping it all on me?! Do you know what sort of position I'm in? Even if my name hasn't been mentioned in the articles, do you know many people called and asked if that was me?! It's so embarrassing I can't go out!

Son Chaeyoung didn’t reply and sat in the dressing room chair.

-The Lee Songha incident was all for you, but do you think I’ll take full responsibility for it?! You’re done if I start talking! If you don’t want your image to end up in the sewer, you personally go to that bastard CEO Baek Hansung and get him to pull down all the articles and restrict the press-!

“Don’t threaten me, teacher.”

Son Chaeyoung said while calmly smiling.

-Wh-what?!

“Don’t threaten me. Also, you didn’t do it for me, it was a trade.”

-You...!

“Although I don’t know what you heard from CEO Baek, I know better than you. I just need to reveal my medical history and hold a press conference. But, teacher, do you think you’ll be able to handle everything that comes out of my mouth?”

Taken aback, Teacher Shim Kyungtaek stuttered. Son Chaeyoung hung up.

Then she threw her phone on the floor.

Chapter 84: When You're Missing Pieces Of The Puzzle (1)

"Are they all here to see the concert?"

The girls looked out the window with open mouths.

Everyone's eyes were so wide that it seemed like they would pop out if they were hit on the back of the head. My eyes were no different since I was looking out the passenger seat window in surprise.

The last recording for Next K-Star was a concert. It was a concert where the eight teams would show the performances they had showed off in the missions.

Since it was a hot topic, I expected there to be a lot of people. However, I was speechless when I saw the number of people gathered at the entrance of the concert hall. Although there were audiences at music broadcasts and regional events, the scale was incomparable to this.

"Ho-how many people are coming today?"

"Since they said the tickets sold out, there should be more than five thousand."

The traitor replied from the driver's seat.

“Five thousand...!”

Im Seoyoung displayed unusual behavior as she bit her nails. Since it seemed like she would even eat her fingers at this rate, I moved my arm behind me.

“Here, since there aren’t any dolls, grab onto this.”

“You will be blessed!”

Im Seoyoung grabbed my arm.

Humans only had two hands, but why did it seem like the number of hands multiplied? Thinking something was strange, I turned around and saw that Lee Songha was holding my hand as well. She was rarely nervous during drama shoots, yet it seemed she still found performances to be difficult. Her face was stiff.

Well, it made sense since it hadn’t been long since she heard that she alone was lowering the team’s average.

“Uh, that person....”

Suddenly, Lee Taehee narrowed her eyes as she saw the crowd outside the car window.

“Why? Did you find someone you know?”

“I think I saw him back when we held a guerilla concert in Hongdae.”

Kim Hyunjo was astonished at her reply.

“You still remember someone you saw then?”

“He stood out because of his large figure and he was the first person to give us a present.”

“Ah! The butter cookies?!”

Im Seoyoung stuck against the window. The butter cookies they received back then were still ‘preserved’ in the living room. LJ threw them out multiple times because they were moldy, but Im Seoyoung brought them back every time. They had a long life.

“Then did he come to see us? He probably came to see us, right?”

“Don’t know. He might have changed the team he supports during this time.”

LJ said something that lacked any dreams or hopes. However, Im Seoyoung’s eyes were already shining. Since she was someone who was concerned ‘fans’ to an unusual degree, it seemed her confidence and motivation were surging at the thought that a fan had come.

It wasn't only Im Seoyoung, the other girls were the same.

The atmosphere in the van gradually heated up.

*

Since Next K-Star was a competition program, there were many in the audience who came to support a specific team. Also, there was bound to be a war of nerves when fans supporting different teams gathered in one place.

"Is Lee Taehee really that good at singing? I don't know about that."

"I'm not even sure if LJ is good at rapping or not."

"There are probably a lot of people who voted for Neptune because of Lee Songha's looks? But is she really that pretty? I don't know if she's that pretty."

"Hey, to be honest, she really is that pretty. If you don't know this, then memorize it."

A few who came to support Sugar Cats whispered amongst each other.

Because there was a past between Sugar Cats and Im Seoyoung,

there was a mood of being wary of Neptune amongst their fans from the start.

It was fine in the beginning since Sugar Cats was ranked high enough to compete against the boy groups while Neptune was at the bottom. However, as episodes aired, Neptune had long since passed them after being neck and neck for a while.

Because of this, there was an especially large number of haters amongst the Sugar Cats fans.

Although a few of the audience members who came to support Neptune revealed displeased expressions, the Sugar Cats fans continued to whisper.

From behind them, a large hand that was the size of a saucepan tapped their shoulders.

“Hey, you people who know nothing, please be quiet.”

“What? Can’t we even spea...!”

They suddenly halted while turning around out of irritation.

His shoulders were broad and his figure was well-built like an athlete. The Sugar Cats fans crouched quietly. If they got into an argument with the man behind them, they thought they might spectate the afterlife instead of the concert.

Just then, a VJ approached them carrying a 6mm camera.

He shoved his camera towards the man behind them.

“I would like to ask for an interview. Who did you come to support?”

“I came to support Neptune.”

The Sugar Cats fans in front of him crouched down even lower at his words. While they were whispering to each other if they should give their seats up and look for another place to sit-

The woman accompanying the man smiled cunningly.

“Hey, why are so serious all the way here? ‘I am Neptune’s fan! I danced with my hands in the air after successfully getting a ticket!’ You have to be like that so that you can get on the broadcast and show your face to Neptune!”

“Shut it.”

The man glared at her, but the woman didn’t pay him any heed and said to the VJ,

“We were there during the guerilla concert too. At first, he snorted, saying that idol performances were lame.”

“Ah, really?”

“When I told that he might end up becoming a fan of one of them and line up for their autograph a month later, he told me to stop with the nonsense. Yet he’s like this now because he became a fan of Neptune.”

*

A chroma-key fabric hung like a curtain on one wall and four chairs crowded below it.

The Neptune members sat on the chairs and prepared for the preliminary interview.

“This is the last interview.”

Producer Go Joontae said while waving a densely filled questionnaire.

Maybe it was because this was the last, but he looked less malicious today. His eyes, which had been filled with the obsession of raising the ratings, and his tongue, which tried its best to make them say more provocative remarks, were calm.

“At the first recording, five out of the seven teams picked Neptune as last place. However, today, which is the final day, you

have reached third place in the overall ranking. As many complications as there were, do you reminisce about the past?”

Right, Im Seoyoung was frozen stiff when she first heard those words.

However, like Producer Go Joontae said, Neptune was third.

Punchline was first, and considering that the second place was also a boy group, Neptune was first out of the girl groups. Even excluding the firepower for their fans, there were many who thought that their rank would go up.

“Honestly, there are times when I’m surprised when I wake up. Thinking it was a dream.”

Im Seoyoung pressed her chest as she replied,

“Not so long ago, I was so worried that the team would be disbanded that I felt I was standing on the edge of a cliff, but my world has changed in only four months. I would be surprised, thinking it was a dream, then, when I realized it wasn’t, I would become so happy.”

Her happiness was displayed through her expression and voice.

Questions continued for a long while. Only after twice the time of other teams’ interviews had passed did the preliminary interview end. When I looked at the time, it was almost time for the

performance. I was about to leave right away when Producer Go Joontae held me back.

“Wait, I would like to interview Mr. Sunwoo a little.”

“Me?”

“If you think about it, Mr. Sunwoo is the one that brought us together. If Mr. Sunwoo didn’t approach me four months ago, would today even have happened?”

Producer Go Joontae said with a bitter expression,

“Let’s do an interview. I’m still being scolded from my superiors because the attempt to cast Mr. Seo Jijoon fell through.”

That was good to hear.

Since Kim Hyunjo left me behind after telling me to do the interview, I did an interview that wasn’t scheduled. Although I didn’t know if my interview would affect the ratings at all, it seemed Producer Go Joontae was satisfied nevertheless.

After finishing everything, I awkwardly shook Producer Go Joontae’s hand, while thinking,

‘Let’s not meet in the future.’

20 minutes before standby.

A heavy tension hung in the waiting room. It felt like there wasn't enough oxygen.

Sugar Cats' performance was going on outside. I could hear the screams of thousands of people all the way here.

Neptune's first performance was right after them. The girls each had their own way of brushing off the tension. Im Seoyoung was breathing deeply while hugging a large bag, and Lee Taehee and LJ were concentrating with earphones in their ears.

Also, Lee Songha sat quietly next to me.

While even the sounds of breathing were silent, Lee Songha's phone vibrated.

When I glanced at the screen, the phone number was saved as 'Home'. Grabbing her phone, Lee Songha hung up without hesitation. Then she completely turned off her phone and put it in her bag.

"You can take it. You have time for a brief call."

At my words, Lee Songha shook her head.

"I don't need to take it."

“Your heart might relax after talking with your parents.”

“It’s okay.”

After thinking for a moment, Lee Songha soon mumbled,

“Also, I relax best when I with oppa.”

10 minutes before standby.

We went out of the waiting room and moved towards the stage.

Maybe it was because today was the last day or because everyone was nervous being in front of thousands of spectators, but other group members gave us words of encouragement.

We arrived backstage right after Sugar Cats’ performance ended. While the special MC and the judges had a light conversation while looking at footage, Sugar Cats came down from the stage while celebrating amongst themselves.

Then, as soon as they saw us, their complexions changed.

They had said stuff about how Lee Songha was now a one-man team and that it was troublesome that the member who was acting was the focus of a girl group, constantly rubbing us the wrong way, but it seemed they couldn’t control their expressions as they

looked like they had swallowed a bug.

It was probably because Neptune, especially Im Seoyoung, came under the spotlight after Star Manager. I bet they were frustrated since they had put in a lot of energy in disregarding and being wary of Im Seoyoung for no reason.

The Sugar Cats' leader, Han Saetbyeol, stopped beside Im Seoyoung.

"Neptune's new song is coming out in spring, right? The one by Simon Lee?"

"We're going to have double title tracks. The other one's made by Taehee unni."

Im Seoyoung said with a smile.

As she passed by, Han Saetbyeol said,

"We're making our comeback then too. I guess we'll see each other in music broadcasts."

"Hello, we are Neptune!"

The girls greeted the audience when they went on stage.

Although this was a greeting they had said constantly to spread their name, there probably wasn't anyone in the audience who didn't know this name.

Right, it did feel reminiscent.

Soon, the instrumentals of the mission song the girls had practiced overnight began to play.

I was inwardly worried since it was their first time performing in front of such a large audience, but it was for naught. I couldn't find a trace of nervousness from the girls on stage. They were like fish in water.

I gazed at the stage without looking away for a moment.

A smile unconsciously hung on my lips at some point.

In celebration of the last recording, we had a simple ending party.

Even though it ended after we each had a piece of cake because it was so late, it was already late into the early morning by the time I arrived home.

Depending on the streetlights, I entered the parking lot.

As if someone had left out a can of tuna, a black alley cat had its

face on the ground in the corner of the parking lot. When I parked my car close to it, it raised its tail up and raised its guard against me.

I stretched after turning off the ignition. Just as I was thinking that I should forget about taking a shower and just sleep, suddenly, my vision was filled with static.

If there wasn't any static, I would have wondered why my hand was moving on its own since I was sitting in a parked car like before.

The familiar inside of a minivan, a familiar steering wheel, and a familiar air freshener.

It was night here too.

On top of the static, there were no streetlights. It was completely dark when looking out the window. Although I could vaguely make out a building, I couldn't see it properly. What was certain was that I wasn't familiar with this place.

"... Then hold an interview and explain."

I was on the phone with someone, but something was odd.

Interview? Explain?

It sounded like I was threatening someone. It was similar to the time I threatened Teacher Shim Kyungtaek last time. No, to be exact, it was similar to my voice when I played back the file I had recorded.

I could hear rough breathing from the other side.

Who was it?

“This isn’t a request. If one interview isn’t enough, then do two or three and correct this situation… Unless you want to roll in the mud together.”

Although my words continued, it was far from being a hint. Instead, it made me more confused.

What about an interview and what did I mean by correcting the situation?

And what did I mean by rolling in the mud together?

My brain was complicated. The breathing on the other side only became rougher, but there wasn’t a reply yet. If I could move my head with my will, I would have immediately turned around and checked the phone number…

The growls of a cat pierced my ears.

Surprised, I turned my head. I saw the black cat, its fur was raised.

After seeing this, I realized that I had returned to the parking lot.

I swallowed my saliva and recalled the future I had seen. Although the alley cat kept making threatening sounds as it prowled around my car, I couldn't move due to the surge of question in my head.

Just when did it occur?

At a sudden thought, I looked at the air freshener stuck in front of the passenger seat.

There was a little over half remaining. There wasn't a big difference between the one in the future. Although I could have put on the exact one after using this one up, if that wasn't the case, then the future could be earlier than I expected.

Who was the person I was on the phone with in the future?

Why was I threatening that person?

... Just what would happen now?

Chapter 85: When You're Missing Pieces Of The Puzzle (2)

Was this how paranoiacs felt?

Since the moment the fact that an incident big enough for me to threaten someone in the future settled in my mind, I kept looking at people with suspicion.

There were Son Chaeyoung and Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, who would happily chop Lee Songha and me apart if they held an ax, as well as the traitor, who seemed to be rotting than simply being uncomfortable.

There were also Producer Go Joontae, who I wouldn't find strange if an incident broke out where I wanted to grab him by the collar even though we separated with a handshake, Sugar Cats, who were in a fuss to see Neptune and Im Seoyoung fail, and that guy from Punchline, who was an eyesore whenever I saw him.

Besides them, there were also people who happily ridiculed us when Lee Songha's controversy broke out but said that we were lucky when things started going well...

There were just too many suspicious people.

Should I say it was like looking for a bomb only to find that my surroundings were filled with landmines?

Among the countless landmines, which one would explode?

“Hey, is your family experiencing some troubles?”

As soon as I sat in the meeting room, Kim Hyunjo asked me suddenly.

“No, they are well.”

“Then problems with love, no, there’s no way you have a girlfriend.”

“Now really, what do you mean by that? I could have a girlfriend.”

“If you can date on top of your current schedule, then you’re my senior.”

When Kim Hyunjo said while chuckling, team leader 3 joined in. They talked about how long it had been since they dated and that this would be my future. They were pouring cold water on my bright future.

Just what were they doing after calling me over when I was busy?

When I gave them a nasty look, Kim Hyunjo grinned whilst supporting his chin.

“I’m asking since you seem so serious considering that you should be grinning all over the place. We finished Next K-Star without any problem and Cat Guardian Ghost, after being heralded as a historical drama, is creating a second wave in China. Everything’s proceeding smoothly.”

“Yeah. At every team leader meeting, I was bashed that we were pouring the money Blackout was making into Neptune and team leader 2, that bastard, never forgot to add his own remarks, but now I can walk in with my back straight.”

Right. It was currently the best time since I was assigned to Neptune.

The final recording of Next K-Star ended well despite our worries, and Cat Guardian Ghost ended after receiving high praise yesterday.

Since the highly anticipated dramas, like Mermaid out of Water and Time Slip, flopped badly, we gained their audience as well, resulting in a syndrome.

It wasn’t spring yet, but reporters were picking Cat Guardian Ghost as the drama of the year and the audience were petitioning for a director’s cut, saying that they would even empty their bank accounts for it.

Lee Songha’s image couldn’t get better.

If the drama was on a public network than cable, then no one would argue with the opinion that Seo Jijoon should receive the acting award and the Rookie of the Year award should belong to Lee Songha.

This was why it wasn't strange for Kim Hyunjo's dark circles to fade noticeably and obvious that the team 3 leader would go around with a happy face.

I would have been the same.

Only if I hadn't seen that future that could give thrillers a run for their money.

"There's something else on my mind. I guess that's why I'm like this."

When I just glossed over it, Kim Hyunjo said as if he understood,

"Is it because of Son Chaeyoung and Teacher Shim Kyungtaek?"

"Well, there's that too."

He wasn't wrong.

The team 3 leader crossed his legs and clicked his tongue.

“Lucky Charm, sometimes, it looks like you worry too much. You shouldn’t worry about them. It’s like a hundred-year poo finally being dislodged. If we were to really expose Teacher Shim Kyungtaek, he’s someone whose secrets would pour down like hail so he won’t try to bite us back.”

“I even heard he’s resigning from the university he’s been teaching at? Something about rumors spreading amongst his students?”

I didn’t know that.

“Since rumors have spread far and wide, all the private lessons with rookies should have been canceled as well. To be honest, if he hadn’t used Son Chaeyoung’s name, he wouldn’t even be close to the number of private lessons he gave. But that’s over now that his relationship with Son Chaeyoung has gone sour.”

“That’s why they say you have one shot in life. How will he live now, that guy?”

“His career in this industry is over.”

The team 3 leader and Kim Hyunjo’s smiles revealed how refreshed they were.

“This is an appetizer, I have more refreshing news.”

Kim Hyunjo smiled meaningfully before grabbing an envelope from the side. The envelope was so thick it looked like it might explode.

After taking the envelope out, Kim Hyunjo pushed it towards me.

“Here, a commercial for a jeans company. It’s for Songha.”

“Son Chaeyoung used to do that commercial, you know.”

The team 3 leader added.

Kim Hyunjo took out a much thicker envelope this time. It was a scenario.

“This is Director Chae Munho’s new movie. He said he wanted to audition Songha.”

“This was a project originally for Son Chaeyoung as well.”

A commercial proposal, movie scenario, and drama synopsis came out after that. Although they were diverse, they all had one thing in common.

They were all projects Son Chaeyoung used to do or ones they were discussing with Son Chaeyoung to do.

I pushed my thoughts about landmines and bombs into a corner of my mind. I looked enchanted at the envelopes in front of me. Oh my god. To those who didn't know, this sight would only look like a bunch of paper, but to me, they were a more shocking sight than diamonds.

The team 3 leader scratched his nose and smiled,

"You should know by looking too, but they are a difference of heaven and earth in terms of roles and investment scale compared to the ones Lee Songha received. Of course, we will have to have internal meetings about movies and dramas and she would have to audition for them, but these are opportunities that don't come to people at Songha's level."

I did receive scenarios and synopses from a few directors, but none of the roles were as important as these. These were roles given to actors whose talent had been verified through multiple projects.

Actors like Son Chaeyoung.

"All of these went to Lee Songha? Is that possible?"

"Normally, it would be impossible. Even though Mermaid out of Water flopped majestically, someone at Son Chaeyoung's level wouldn't lose so many commercial and project offers because one drama flopped. However, for so many and for all of them to go to Songha..."

“The CEO probably had a hand in this.”

The team 3 leader and Kim Hyunjo answered in turn.

Then the team 3 leader gave me a strange look.

“From what the director said, apparently, you’re the one who got these?”

“… I got them?”

“Well, I don’t know if he was joking or not, but that’s apparently what the CEO said. That Jung Sunwoo obtained them.”

I suddenly recalled the phone call I had with CEO Baek Hansung.

When I asked that Son Chaeyoung pay a proper price instead of a simple apology, CEO Baek Hansung had said that he would think about the price.

Kim Hyunjo said while grinning,

“This is probably the worst nightmare for Son Chaeyoung?”

Since an ending party was a place where people expressed their inner thoughts after the drama ended, the mood of the ending party changed depending on the success of the drama. In the case

of Mermaid out of Water, there was an article that they didn't even hold an ending party.

On the other hand, Cat Guardian Ghost's ending party was wild.

As if they were venting about the busy schedules they had while filming the drama, the film team were pouring bomb shots into their stomachs. Even the production employees, employees from TVL, and the celebrities unbuckled their belts and drank. People were drunk on alcohol and excitement at every table that they were causing a commotion.

"Mr. Sunwoo! Here, here! Come and have a drink!"

It hadn't even been ten minutes since I returned to Lee Songha's side.

Did they all decide to call out my name as their drinking habit? They've been calling my name from all around for a while now. When I turned around, I saw it was the table of managers this time.

"Jung Sunwoo, you're busy today,"

Chief Lee Bongjoon chuckled beside me. He shook his round body left and right. Since Seo Jijoon, who was sitting beside him, wasn't good with alcohol, he took a few shots for him, and it seemed like he was drunk considering his face was red.

“I know, right? It feels like they are calling my name more frequently than the waiters and waitresses.”

“It’s good. Good. This industry runs on who you know, and this is proof their perception of you has changed; from one of the countless managers to someone worth befriending. It might also be that you’ve become more approachable because of the entertainment show.”

Then he giggled again, saying that just looking at me made him laugh.

While clicking my tongue, I looked to my side. Lee Songha was nodding and eating while listening to someone talk. It seemed she drank quite a bit of alcohol every time they toasted, yet her face didn’t change in the slightest.

Lee Songha stopped eating when a vibration rang from below the table.

Seeing as it displayed ‘Home’, it seemed to be from her family. Lee Songha stared at the screen for a while before putting it in her pocket when the ringing stopped.

“If it’s too noisy inside, you can call them outside.”

“It’s fine. It’s better if I don’t answer now. I had some drinks too.”

She whispered after leaning her head towards me.

Were her parents strict? While thinking this, the table of managers called my name out again.

“Songha, it looks like I have to go to that table over there.”

“Okay, one second.”

Lee Songha began collecting her glass, chopsticks, and plate. I quickly grabbed her shoulder since it seemed like she was going to follow me.

“What do you ‘one second’? Don’t you see they’ve made a mixture of beer, soju, and coke and are drinking it in bowlfuls? Just stay here with the chief.”

After sitting back down, Lee Songha looked at Chief Lee Bongjoon. I was on my way to the table calling my name out like a song after patting her small shoulders twice when I heard Chief Lee Bongjoon grumble,

“Hey, Lee Songha. Don’t you think the expressions you look at your manager and me with are too different? You’re making me sober up.”

I looked back because I was curious of her expression, but I only saw the back of her head.

“Hey, Mr. Sunwoo, come sit here. Sit.”

“I only learned how funny Mr. Sunwoo is after watching the broadcast!”

As soon as I sat in the empty seat, they began talking about Star Manager. It seemed that it would serve as my business card for a while. The ratings were clearly only 12%, but it felt like the entire country had seen it. Everyone knew it no matter which table I went.

They changed the topic only after talking about my damn dark past and flattering me by saying that they thought I was a good person even though they found me difficult to approach.

“Now that the drama’s done too, all that’s left is for Lee Songha to sweep the commercials. It seemed like she’ll be in a ton of them? Advertisers like people like her.”

“I hope we get a variety of proposals.”

When I replied while smiling, someone said while sighing,

“Wow, if you filmed and uploaded that, then she might even get a Korean barbecue restaurant commercial proposal. How can she eat meat so elegantly? What a waste to not film it, what a waste.”

"… Elegant?"

The bomb shots I had taken almost came out.

When I turned around, Lee Songha was still eating voraciously amidst the celebrities. Since the mood was so good, it looked good no matter what she did. Still, if people looked at her carefully, they wouldn't say she was elegant. It would make sense if they said she ate heartily.

A few more rounds of bomb shots passed.

Since we were all managers, we naturally began talking about our work.

We talked about what the celebrities we were assigned to were thinking about for their next project and about how it was difficult to choose because we were receiving too many synopses after the success of this project.

There were even quite a few people asking me what I was thinking for Lee Songha' next project because Pan Production had told people that I picked Cat Guardian Ghost after reading its synopsis.

The thin Chief Ju licked his lips as he said,

"Mr. Sunwoo should develop Lee Songha further. She's good at acting, has good luck, and you never know, right? She might

become a walking one-person company. Then you can quit your damn company and set up your own."

"That's easier said than done. It's not like W&U is some mom-and-pop shop, his assigned celebrity will change a few times while he gains experience."

Chief Kim joined in, shaking his head.

The managers from the table next to us joined in,

"If they are compatible, they might continue to work together. There are cases like Chief Lee Bongjoon and Seo Jijoon at W&U. I bet if Chief Lee asks Seo Jijoon to leave with him, he will."

"But Ms. Lee Songha seems like she's willing to leave if you ask her to right now. They have a good relationship. I saw that she looked at you every time you moved tables. She also looked back whenever she heard your name being called out loud."

"Really?"

Chief Ju replied to my question with a laid-back expression,

"Kids always check to see if their moms are still there when they are dropped off at a playground. Something like that I guess. She's looking at you now."

When I turned around, my eyes met Lee Songha's.

We both blinked once before smiling simultaneously. Seeing this, Chief Lee Bongjoon tapped her shoulder and said something. I didn't know what he was saying, but she was listening carefully. I was curious if he was saying strange things again.

I was looking for the opportunity to move back to that table when Chief Kim placed his empty glass down and tapped my back.

"Mr. Sunwoo, I have something I want to talk to you about, mind if we step outside for a second?"

"Talk with me?"

I looked at him in surprise since we weren't close. Beyond his glasses, his eyes curled into a smile.

To sober up a little, we went outside.

Facing the moist night breeze, I brushed my hair to the side. Maybe it was because it was the end of February, but sleet was raining down instead of snow.

Chief Kim paused for a moment before saying,

"Mr. Sunwoo, I am just passing on what my superiors want to say."

“Yes, please say it.”

“Do you have any thoughts on moving to our company?”

“… Pardon?”

I asked back because it was so sudden.

It seemed I didn’t hear wrong due to the influence of alcohol because Chief Kim said,

“Of course, under better conditions than the ones you have now and as a chief, how about it?”

Chapter 86: When You're Missing Pieces Of The Puzzle (3)

I sobered up.

I recalled information regarding Chief Kim's company, Taeum Management. Compared to W&U, it was small, but it was a stable company. While it seemed like there were other celebrities, they focused mainly on actors. I didn't know any more details besides that.

Why were they giving this offer to someone who hadn't even been a manager for five months?

After racking my brain, I straightforwardly asked,

"Is it perhaps because of Songha?"

Chief Kim laughed out loud.

"We are well aware that Ms. Songha is part of a girl group and has a lot of time left on her contract, do you think we want to be sued? It's not like that."

"Then why are you giving me this offer?"

When I asked, Chief Kim exhaled white steam similar to cigarette smoke from his mouth as he said,

“Well, they said they heard a lot of good things about Mr. Sunwoo.”

“From who?”

“I don’t know any more than that. Either way, the company said that they would like to meet with you if you are willing. You are probably aware we aren’t some third-rate company as well. This is a good offer.”

That was why it was so strange.

The thought about the future which I had suppressed was slowly crawling its way up. Thinking that this might be related to the incident in the future, I added it to my list of suspicions.

Either way, it wasn’t like I was thinking of changing jobs. While the conditions were good, they weren’t good enough for me to leave Neptune and everything I had built up at W&U behind. Since I felt that there was no need to test the waters, I shook my head.

“While I am thankful for the offer, I do not have any plans on changing companies at this moment.”

“Then… Contact me if you change your mind.”

After candidly retreating, Chief Kim took out his business card

from his wallet and handed it to me.

I received and casually put it in my wallet when Chief Kim smiled as he said,

“I feel like she’s going to bore a hole in my face. I’ll go in first.”

“Pardon?”

Chief Kim gestured with his chin as he passed me. When I turned around, I saw Lee Songha standing there with a shocked expression. She seemed to be taken aback when our eyes met as she quickly pressed the button of the coffee vending machine.

“Did you hear our conversation?”

When I asked after walking to her, she shook her small head left and right.

“No.”

“I think you did.”

“To be honest, I did hear a little. I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, I only heard it when I came to get some coffee.”

While insisting she was innocent, Lee Songha licked her lips

slightly.

“But oppa…”

“Yeah. I’m not changing companies. Don’t plan to.”

I replied before she even asked.

Smiling silently, she raised a paper cup filled with coffee. Then, as if emptying a shot glass, she drank it all in one go. Since her actions were so natural, I only became surprised two seconds later.

“Wasn’t it hot?”

“… It was.”

Her face instantly turned red. It looked like steam would escape from her lips.

I quickly got her a glass of cold water and she gulped it down in one go. She was acting a bit strange. When I looked at her closely, her expression was fine, but her eyes were wet and wavering like the moon reflected on the water.

“You seem drunk. Did you drink more?”

“Chief Lee gave me some.”

That guy.

When I looked at Chief Lee Bongjoon, his eyes were already half-closed. Seo Jijoon would probably take care of him. After explaining the situation to people who were asking me why I was leaving already, I left the restaurant with Lee Songha.

Leaving the driving to the substitute driver, I got in the back seat with Lee Songha. As the heater warmed the minivan, it seemed she also became drowsy as her long neck leaned to the side.

I placed a neck pillow under Lee Songha's neck. Since her quiet breathing was ticklish, I turned my head and looked out the window. The sleet on the window melted and dripped down.

How long was I like this? I felt like I had fallen asleep temporarily so I stretched my waist when I heard a vibration coming from Lee Songha's clothes pocket.

When I left it alone, it stopped soon after before ringing again. On the third time it rang, I shook Lee Songha's shoulder.

"Songha, wake up. I think it might be important."

Since it didn't look like she would wake up anytime soon, I took out her phone.

It was her family again.

Concerned that something might have happened to her family, I answer the phone with one hand while shaking Lee Songha with the other. As soon as her phone stopped vibrating, I heard the sighing voice of a middle-aged woman.

-Just why haven't you answe-

"I answered the call for her. I am Songha's manager."

-Her manager?

"Yes. I am Jung Sunwoo. It seems Songha is tired since she is sleeping. I answered the call for her in case there was an emergency."

-Jung Sunwoo... Ah, you're the one who appeared on the Lunar New Year's broadcast, right? The one who told Songha to act. I am her mom.

Her scolding voice instantly became gentler.

-It so happens I was hoping to meet you in person after watching that broadcast. What a coincidence. Could we meet in person later?

"In person? What might the reason be..."

-I think that Songha should quit the girl group and focus only on acting. Wasting her time...

Suddenly, a hand shot out from beside me and took the phone away.

Even though it was dark, I could clearly see Lee Songha's frowning face.

"I'll call you back."

After saying that, she hung up. Since we arrived at Neptune's residence, I asked the substitute driver to excuse us for a moment. Once he said he would have a smoke and left, Lee Songha immediately said,

"You don't need to see her. Don't see her. I'll talk to her."

"Is this why you've been avoiding her calls?"

Lee Songha nodded her head. After a moment of silence, I heard a low voice.

"We fought about this since the Lunar New Year's long weekend. It seems she was suddenly dissatisfied with lots of things. I looked into it, and it looks that this is a common occurrence in celebrity families. It's not just us."

“You should have said something. If she keeps saying that, the chief or I co-“

“I’ll handle it on my own since it’s my family matter.”

A few thoughts brushed my mind.

A girl group that only now began taking steps, and a member who came under the glamorous spotlight thanks to a historic drama. Problems concerning personal schedules and how to calculate their earnings.

I had thought that we were lucky since there wasn’t any disharmony within the group, but there was a family matter.

Currently, Neptune was on a roll, and even putting the contract aside, if there was discord in the team against Lee Songha, it wouldn’t do well for their image.

The incident in the future wasn’t related to Lee Songha’s family, right?

While I became suspicious again, Lee Songha mumbled,

“To be honest, since I was so frustrated… I wanted to call oppa during the long weekend.”

“You should have. Why didn’t you? You know my number.”

“If I talk about work, it’ll bug you when you’re resting for a change.”

“That’s not work. You can call me next time.”

At my words, Lee Songha stared at me. Since it seemed like she would ask me if what I said was true, I nodded. Then a smile slowly bloomed on her calm face.

*

As though the raining sleet last night was a lie, the day was bright this morning.

However, in this room covered in thick curtains, the bleak atmosphere of yesterday remained. There were broken vases and appliances, and books were scattered all over the room. Only the mirror above her dressing table was intact.

Son Chaeyoung stood in this mess.

She looked like she would explode at any moment. Her distorted face was convulsing, and her eyes gave off a fierce aura. Son Chaeyoung glared at the wall as though she would rip someone to shreds if they were present.

Soon, the phone in her hand rang.

The dial tone rang out in the dark room.

“She might really get a mental illness at this rate, team leader.”

Chief Jo, whose eyes and cheeks were sunken in, said as he glanced at his phone. On the constantly vibrating screen was the name ‘Son Chaeyoung’. Clenching his head, he said, as if pleading, to the team 2 leader sitting in front of him,

“She’ll probably act more terrifyingly from now on. I feel like I’m going to suffocate.”

“What is Chaeyoung doing right now?”

“She’s probably smashing appliances again. I can’t even work up the courage to check up on her.”

Chief Jo mumbled as if frightened.

The team 2 leader clicked his tongue as he said,

“That’s probably true considering her temper. Snatching other people’s stuff, maybe, but she’s not the type of person to have her things snatched away. But it wasn’t just one but a bunch of them. On top of that, she had them taken by Lee Songha, someone who she tried to bury in secret... That’s why I told you to keep her in

check, you!”

Surprised by the team leader’s irritated shout, Chief Jo prostrated himself.

“But will Chaeyoung still renew the contract even now?”

“Don’t you know what kind of person the CEO is? She’s only smashing appliances because he’s got her on a leash. If not, she would have already ripped the contract apart. No, still, why is the CEO going this far…”

As if he couldn’t understand, the team 2 leader frowned.

“In any case, there hasn’t been a quiet day since Jung Sunwoo that guy joined our company.”

He muttered before suddenly rubbing his beard. Not long after, he opened his mouth.

“Since Chaeyoung won’t be able to work on any projects in her current state for the time being, do you want to be in charge of Lee Songha?”

“Lee Songha?”

Even though he had looked like he was about to die just now, Chief Jo’s eyes widened.

“I was going to talk about it with the director anyways, but we can’t let Jung Sunwoo continuously be in charge of Lee Songha. While it seems like he has a good eye, he’s still a chick who doesn’t know the ways of the industry.”

“That’s true.”

“Lee Songha, she seems like a real gem the more I see her. Before she becomes difficult to handle like Son Chaeyoung, we need to manage her by assigning a proper manager to her. It’ll be good for her as well if a veteran takes care of her.”

“I’ll be happy to do it.”

Chief Jo nodded his head repeatedly.

Even though they were getting ahead of themselves, their conversation continued for a long while.

*

It was noisy.

When I opened my eyes a crack, it was still dark in my room. The cause of the sound was my phone on my table.

Seeing as the sun hadn’t risen yet, it seemed to be early. Did I set

my alarm for the wrong time?

I fumbled to unplug the charging cable and looked at the screen. It wasn't an alarm but a call. It was Reporter Park Woojeong. Looking at the time, it was a bit past 1 a.m.

Did she call me by accident?

While yawning, I answered the call.

"Hello, reporter?"

-Ah, Mr. Sunwoo! Sorry for calling at this late hour. Still, I thought I should tell you this quickly!

My eyes jolted open on their own when I heard her urgent voice.

"What is it?"

-Do you know someone name Lee Joohwan? From Punchline...

"The guy who raps. I know."

I quickly got up and turned on the lights. Reporter Park continued to speak.

-He posted something on his social media just now, but no matter

how I look at it, it seems to be aimed at Ms. Songha.

“Please wait, I’ll check right now.”

With my phone against my ear, I quickly went online.

Then I checked Punchline’s Lee Joohwan’s social media account. Like Reporter Park had said, there was a new post.

A shitty post that made me doubt my eyes the moment I saw it.

A lonely night.

While meeting each other fleetingly on the set over the past few months, I believed there was something real between us. Just what is success that makes a person’s eyes change so much? I turned the drama off in the middle because it was difficult to see your face. Was I foolish? Or was the industry simply like this? How dirty and painful.

“What kind of crazy-!”

I was so taken aback that I swore.

Met on the set for the past few months, success, drama, he only didn’t reveal her name, but anyone would think he was talking about Lee Songha. Looking at the comments on the side, Punchline fans were already buzzing.

They commented about how this was Lee Songha no matter how you looked at it and that she ignored him as soon as she became successful.

Each comment mentioned Lee Songha.

Reporter Park Woojeong cautiously asked.

-Ms. Songha, does she really have something with Lee Joohwan? Even if she does...

“No. He’s speaking nonsense.”

-Then you need to deal with this as soon as you can. When an idol scandal breaks out, only the girl’s side suffers. This is pretty much publicly screwing her over. Since it’s still early in the morning, it’s quiet for now, but it’ll become a huge topic soon!

“Thank you, reporter. I’ll call you back.”

I hung up and called Team Leader Park. She was in the middle of a call. Kim Hyunjo was in a call as well. Did they hear about it already? I sent them a message just in case and let out a big breath.

Was it this?

The incident I saw in the future. Was this bastard the bomb?

I did tell the person to hold an interview and explain. The situation fit perfectly.

In the future, I was undoubtedly threatening someone. It wasn't a request. I threatened the person by saying that they needed to fix this if they didn't want to roll in the mud with me. During that time, the other person couldn't say a word.

If this was the incident, then what did I threaten him with?

Not sure what the proper term in English is, but basically, in Korea, you can call someone to drive your car for you when you're drunk or something. This is to prevent DUIs. It's like a taxi, but the driver comes over to drive your car for you.

Chapter 87: When You're Missing Pieces Of The Puzzle (4)

Was I blindly threatening the person?

After rubbing my chin, I shook my head. It didn't seem that way.

My tone was similar to when I threatened Teacher Shim Kyungtaek. It didn't seem like I was threatening because I was at my wit's end, it definitely seemed like I possessed something that I could threaten the other person with.

What was it?

Even while I was mulling over this, the comments on Lee Joohwan's post kept increasing.

Just what was Lee Joohwan, that crazy bastard, doing after taking a dump like that? Did he write that in a hazy, drunken state before collapsing? Or was he chuckling as he watched the internet's reaction with a clear mind?

Anger surged up my throat just recalling his sleek face. If he was in front of me, I probably would have held him up by his collar and punched him.

My phone rang again. It was Team Leader Park.

-Is he an idiot? What kind of shit is he trying to pull?

As soon as I answered the phone, I heard her swear. It seemed her anger had reached its peak. Well, at least she didn't have a mental breakdown. The back of my head ached even though I knew an incident would occur, to others, this was a bolt out of the blue.

-Did you know anything about this? Was there any sign that this might happen?

"Nope. I only learned about it just now because a reporter contacted me. He had been quiet ever since he confronted Songha during the recording last time."

Team Leader said in a pissed voice.

-Lee Joohwan that crazy bastard. I don't know what he's up to, but he's not answering his phone. The chief and team leader at his company won't answer either. Not only are they not answering my calls, they aren't picking up Mr. Hyunjo's either. Those gangsters.

"Are you with the chief? He was on call."

-We decided to meet at the company so I'm on my way there. Mr. Hyunjo is probably busy right now as well. There wasn't a peaceful day last year, yet we're really driving away the bad luck early in the year!

“I’ll get ready and go to work too.”

I had my phone rested on my shoulder as I got ready when Team Leader Park said.

-I’m trying to stop the press the best I can, but it doesn’t seem it’ll last long. So you call Songha and confirm that there wasn’t anything going on between them. Help her prepare her heart as well.

“Yes.”

-No matter how we explain our position, there will be many netizens who are happily writing stories connecting Songha and Lee Joohwan together. Tell her not to go on the internet since there will be a lot of hate comments because Punchline has a lot of elementary and middle school fans.

“Yes, also, team leader,”

I stopped Team Leader Park, who was about to hastily hang up.

“Could you give me Lee Joohwan’s personal phone number?”

-I told you that bastard isn’t picking up right now. He’s not replying to texts either.

“I’ve met him before so you never know. I just want to try.”

-... Okay, you never know. Let's do everything we can. I'll send it by text.

While I was waiting for Team Leader Park's text, I called Lee Songha.

Even though it was late at night, the call went through right away.

-Oppa?

It seemed she wasn't aware of the situation as she talked in a puzzled voice.

I said a few things as if there was nothing going on before getting to the point.

"Songha, I'm only asking just in case, but there's nothing going on with you and Lee Joohwan, right?"

-Who's that?

I wasn't suspicious from the start, but this was exactly the reply I wanted to hear.

"The guy who raps in Punchline, the one who tried to start a conversation with you last time. Nothing happened afterwards,

right?”

-Ah… No. Oppa, you told me not to associate with him.

“Good job. That crazy bastard posted nonsense about you so it looks like it’ll be a little noisy for a while. So don’t go on the internet for now.”

It hadn’t been long since her ‘add-on’ and acting controversies. It would be normal to be nervous when thinking about them, but Lee Songha didn’t even ask what was going on.

-Yes.

That was all.

Her voice didn’t contain a shred of worry or fluster. The only thing I felt was firm trust.

Going out into the moonless sky, I said,

“Okay, don’t worry and wait for me.”

Just as I got in my minivan, I received a text from Team Leader Park.

It was Lee Joohwan’s personal contact information.

Exhaling a stuffy breath, I pressed the call button. A rap played out as the caller ringtone, burrowing into my ears.

I swallowed my dry saliva. Even though I resolved myself to not depend so much on foresight multiple times and even though I told myself not to get hung up on an ability that can disappear as suddenly as it appeared, I was hoping for static to appear in my vision at some point.

However, there were no signs of my foresight ability activating even when the call went to voicemail.

After sending a message saying I was Lee Songha's manager, I called him again. Even the second and third time, Lee Joohwan continued to be silent like Team Leader Park had said.

Thinking about it for a bit, I decided to call Reporter Park Woojeong.

I thanked her for telling me about the situation before asking,

"Are there any tabloids about Lee Joohwan?"

-Tabloids?

"Yes, a bad rumor or something that would make him tense. Anything like that."

Something I could threaten him with to be exact.

-There are a lot of rumors about him. Please wait. I'll ask my colleagues.

Not long after, Reporter Park Woojeong told me the rumors she had gathered.

They were about how he was a bit crazy even before he debuted and about how his company had a headache dealing with him because he was the type to do whatever he wants. There were a few others besides those. However, there wasn't anything that perked my ears.

Finally, Reporter Park Woojeong cautiously said.

-Also, apparently, Lee Joohwan went on a date not too long ago.

"A date?"

-Yes, around two weeks ago. My colleague who told me this kept asking whether that person he went on a date with was Ms. Songha...

Although I was an atheist, at this moment I wanted to thank a god.

Reporter Park Woojeong's voice became distant as my vision became dark.

I had never been so happy to see a static-filled vision.

Hoping it was related to Lee Joohwan, I concentrated more than ever.

I was inside a bar. The lights were gentle and dim. A beer glass and a glass bowl containing snacks were placed on top of a wooden bar in front of me. A somewhat familiar hip-hop song was playing.

My future self moved his hand and raised the cold beer glass. Then the refreshing beer went down my throat which was like a dry wasteland.

Perking my ears, I heard the conversation between two female bartenders.

"Lee Joohwan's life has turned around. He's been a hot topic for days now. Keeps going up and down on the real-time search rankings too. His public image has changed from all the sympathy he's received, and Lee Songha's image has crumbled."

"Yeah."

My future self acted like he was drinking as he carefully examined the woman who gave the short reply.

She looked pretty. She had short hair and a slim, curvy body.

“Lee Joohwan, don’t tell me he’s not going to even meet with us now?”

The other bartender secretly asked the short-haired woman.

“But, Hyesung, didn’t you say that you were seeing Lee Joohwan not that long ago?”

As soon as I returned to the present, I hung up the call.

I felt like I finally took a breath of fresh air after being stuck in a dark cave. Churning my brain, I assembled the information I saw and heard in the future.

So there was a woman that Lee Joohwan might have been seeing.

The woman my future self had found.

If this was certain, then it was a great material to threaten Lee Joohwan with.

Since this meant that Lee Joohwan, who targeted Lee Songha on social media acting like he was a hurt simplehearted man by saying that there was something going on between the two of them and how her eyes had changed, was playing around and going on dates

with a completely different woman.

Thinking about it for a moment, I unlocked my phone again.

Then, as if baiting him, I sent a text message to Lee Joohwan.

-You must be busy. Flirting on set by yourself and going on a date with Ms. Hyesung.

*

Punchline's residence.

Lee Joohwan was lying on the sofa while checking people's reactions on social media on his tablet. While whistling, he said,

"Oppa's too good for Lee Songha. Forget that opportunist and cheer up. Anyone wanna go hate on Neptune's official homepage together? Oppa, only be hurt for today. Before W&U buries this, I'll store it and spread it throughout the community... Wow, our fans are working hard so early in the morning. Hyung, have any articles been published?"

"None yet."

The chief, who was sitting at the edge of the sofa, shook his head. There was a tablet in his hand as well.

Lee Joohwan frowned in dissatisfaction.

“Did all the reporters die? Why is it so quiet when I gave them such a huge story?”

“It looks like W&U has a hand in it, but it’s useless. Once an article pops up, tons of articles will follow behind it.”

Just then, the phone on top of the table vibrated. Lee Joohwan smirked when he saw the screen.

“If I don’t answer, you should just give up. So persistent. At this rate, I’ll memorize all the W&U employee’s numbers. But why is hyung’s so quiet?”

“I turned it off since it said the battery was low.”

“Should I turn it off too since it’s annoying?”

“Just leave it. Even though we’ve already stuck our heads in the sand, it’s too obvious if both our phones are off.”

Punchline’s main vocal, who was rummaging through the fridge behind the sofa, joined their conversation.

“But, even if it’s noise marketing, isn’t this coming on too strong? How are you going to deal with it tomorrow?”

“Too strong? It’s not like I said Lee Songha’s name outright and swore at her. Also, in my perspective, there really was something going on between us.”

Lee Joohwan said while raising his shoulders proudly.

“Things might have gone well if she hadn’t suddenly become so popular. When I, the person in question, think that way, what are they going to do? Sue me?”

Lee Joohwan chuckled as if just thinking about it was funny.

The chief clicked his tongue as he said,

“You just stay quiet. I’ll settle it in the morning.”

“What are you going to say?”

“It’s not like the fact you’re hard to handle is a secret. I’ll appeal to W&U by swearing at you a ton. I’m going to tell them that I’m going to make you take the post down so you make sure to take it down on time.”

“Okay. There are going to screenshots floating around by tomorrow morning anyways.”

Lee Joohwan said in a ridiculing manner before picking his phone up again. The vibration this time was short. He initially

thought it would be similar to the overflowing number of messages he had received so far, but then he jolted up from the sofa.

“What is this?!”

“Why? Who is it?”

The chief got up as well and asked.

However, Lee Joohwan didn’t reply and raised his phone to his ear. He paced back and forth in the living room nervously with a stiff face.

Soon, the dial tone stopped.

-Yes, this is Jung Sunwoo.

“What is that text? What kind of nonsense is that?!”

Lee Joohwan asked immediately.

After a momentary silence, he heard a laughter-mixed voice.

-Nonsense is what your post was. No, seeing as you called me after understanding that, I guess it does seem like nonsense.

“What?!”

-You were so busy flirting by yourself on set and going on a date with another woman. Ah, is this industry simply like this? How dirty and painful.

“Date? Just who went on a date with who-!”

As soon as he licked his lips to stop-

-Ms. Hyesung. The bartender with short hair.

Lee Joohwan stood rigidly. His face turned rotten instantly.

The chief, who had listened to their conversation from the side, hurriedly turned on his phone.

-Don’t you think it’s better if to handle the situation by taking down your post and posting an explanation? Your fans are causing a fuss by saying that they feel sorry for you. I think your young fans will be disappointed if you got caught going on a date with another woman when you talked about how someone’s eyes changed and how lonely you felt.

While his tone seemed calm, the content of his words was no doubt a threat.

Ruffling his hair, Lee Joohwan looked at his chief. As if saying there was nothing else they could do, the chief sighed and nodded

his head. Kicking the sofa, Lee Joohwan held back his swears and said,

“Umm. I’ll, I’ll take it down right away. The post. I made a mistake while drunk.”

After making an excuse, he asked while hiding his nervousness,

“… But how do you know Hyesung? Are you the only one who knows?”

The other side paused for a moment before replying.

-No. I only heard about it.

Lee Joohwan ended up swearing eventually.

*

It seemed he was in quite the hurry as Lee Joohwan took down his post from his social media at a frightening speed. After confirming it, I called Reporter Park Woojeong again.

Her voice was still serious.

-Mr. Sunwoo, I think the article will go up soon-!

“I think it’s been resolved well. All thanks to you.”

-... Pardon?

She said, perplexed.

“As thanks, I’ll give you something article-worthy.”

-Article-worthy?

“Yes, about Lee Joohwan’s scandal.”
Experiencing bad luck now for better luck in the future.

Chapter 88: When You're Missing Pieces of the Puzzle (5)

The door of the PR team office smashed open.

Kim Hyunjo came in wearing a fierce expression. It seemed he was on a call as his phone was stuck next to his ear.

"Yeah, Reporter Min. Look into it for now."

After ending the call, he looked back and forth between Team Leader Park and me.

"Did you hear about Lee Joohwan's relationship with a girl? Did you?"

When we looked at him blankly, Kim Hyunjo said in a frustrated manner,

"I heard that that bastard was seeing another girl? I hear she's a non-celebrity. Reporter Min says that since the story is so detailed, it's pretty much a fact. Apparently, G-Today holds the information. Sunwoo, don't you have a reporter you're close with there?"

"I do."

When I replied, Kim Hyunjo slapped my back and urged,

“Call her and ask. You have to use your connections at a time like this or when else would you?”

“Mr. Hyunjo, don’t be so hasty and have a seat. Calm down a little.”

Team Leader Park pointed to an empty seat.

“Do I look like I can calm down right now? When a rabid dog is causing a fuss? Wait, if you’re telling me not to be hasty, that means you’ve already heard…”

Kim Hyunjo, who had been talking with a frown, paused before saying,

“No, why are the two of you like that? Team leader, why are you so calm? Not long ago, you were going berserk, asking where Lee Joohwan was and how simply screwing him over wouldn’t be enough, right?”

Team Leader Park looked at me and smiled brightly.

“Ask Mr. Sunwoo. Mr. Sunwoo made a great contribution today.”

“A great contribution? What is it?”

“Mr. Sunwoo completely submerged Lee Joohwan in shit. We now only need to take him out and fry him up.”

Kim Hyunjo looked at me with a perplexed face.

“What are you talking about?”

“Hmm, listen to this.”

Without tiring my mouth from explaining, I handed Kim Hyunjo my phone. Then I played an audio recording. The audio recording contained the conversation I had with Lee Joohwan on the phone.

As soon as he heard Lee Joohwan’s voice, Kim Hyunjo’s eyes widened.

“Is this Lee Joohwan? That bastard picked up his phone?”

“Just listen to it, Mr. Hyunjo. Then your mind will be at peace.”

Kim Hyunjo hesitantly took a seat. Lee Joohwan and my voice played out in silence. Kim Hyunjo’s face gradually turned strange, and he even started staring at me intensely.

I avoided his gaze with a cough since I wasn’t used to threatening someone then listening to the recorded threat with others. No, wouldn’t it be a problem if I got used to it?

With a thrilled expression, Team Leader Park said,

“Here’s the climax.”

‘Umm. I’ll, I’ll take it down right away. The post. I made a mistake while drunk.’

Lee Joohwan’s excuse was smeared with anxiety and confusion.

Even though it was her second time listening to it, Team Leader Park’s reaction was outstanding. Should I say it looked like she had downed a beer in one shot?

“Send me this. I need to save it on my phone and listen to it when I need to calm my heart. It has an immediate effect.”

I readily nodded my head at Team Leader Park’s words.

Kim Hyunjo, who now had an expression similar to Team Leader Park, said,

“I bet his company is in mayhem?”

“His post on social media was brought down right away. They are probably wracking their brains trying to deal with it.”

At my words, Kim Hyunjo gave me a strange look once again.

Then, with a laugh, he said,

"This guy's talented, isn't he? You're even better than me."

When I smiled without replying, Kim Hyunjo patted my back.

With a relaxed expression, he told Team Leader Park,

"I was thinking about how this was a bolt out of the blue, but if it's like this, things should blow over without any damage."

"We can't just let things blow over."

Not wearing any makeup, Team Leader Park's lips became crooked.

"Since he's already pulled Lee Songha into this, even if he takes his post down and explains, there will be a lot of people who won't believe it and will think that we pressured him. Elementary and middle schoolers ignore facts and believe in whatever they want to believe."

"That is..."

"So, if we want to make this situation advantageous for us, let's make Lee Joohwan a true bastard."

Just then, my blank phone vibrated. It was Reporter Park Woojeong.

“Yes, reporter.”

Team Leader Park and Kim Hyunjo’s gazes were locked on me. Their gazes contained a strange excitement. Reporter Park Woojeong’s voice from the other side was also quite excited

-Mr. Sunwoo, I found her. I found that woman!

“You did? Already?”

It hadn’t even been that long since I told Reporter Park Woojeong.

Even the police wouldn’t be able to find their suspect this fast.

-My colleague helped me. Since this didn’t involve a celebrity couple but was a scandal involving an idol and a non-celebrity, he wouldn’t have helped out normally but said it would be interesting if we pulled Lee Songha into the story as well.

“Ah.”

-We checked people associated with Punchline members. Though they swore at us since we woke them up early in the morning. After snooping around knowing her appearance, occupation, and

name, we found her in no time. We already talked to her on the phone as well.

I was really surprised this time.

“You even talked to her?”

-The bar she works at opens until 4 a.m. Also...

After pausing for a moment, Reporter Park Woojeong said in an excited voice.

-We confirmed the facts after saying we would compensate her. Now we just need to write an article.

*

There was still a lot of time before the day brightened.

The Punchline members, who had been taking a nap, were forced awake and were sitting in the living room. They sighed out of frustration and gulped down cold water. They also stared at Lee Joohwan mumbling on the sofa.

“Bastard, if you’re going to do something, do it properly. What is this?”

“What are you going to do if our team image becomes bad?”

“Ahh, that foolish son of a bitch. Preventing us from sleeping by causing a ruckus so early in the morning.”

“Fuck, you’re loud! I’m already pissed.”

Even though Lee Joohwan spoke out impulsively, the Punchline members, who were familiar with his personality, ignored him as if he was a barking dog.

Scratching his head aggressively, Lee Joohwan swore.

“Motherfucker, this was definitely a foolproof plan. My popularity would rise, and I would knock Lee Songha off her high horse as well. It was pure genius. Fuck. That manager bastard, I didn’t like him during the recording, but in the end...”

He vented his anger by kicking the floor.

“Hey, Joohwan!”

The chief, who had constantly been on the phone in another room, rushed out.

“What? Why? What is it now?!”

“You called that Hyesung or whatever and handled things properly, right?”

“You saw me talk with her a while ago. I told her to keep her mouth shut since reporters might call her.”

With an uneasy expression, the chief said,

“Call her again. I heard some strange information.”

“She’s fine. She’s so head over heels for me that she won’t say anything if I tell her not to.”

Grumbling, Lee Joohwan called her.

However, after ringing for a minute, it went to her voicemail.

“Fuck, why isn’t she picking up?”

“Isn’t she answering on purpose? Send her a text.”

“I’m telling you she’s not. She’s probably busy. Just wait a bit.”

The second, third, and even the tenth call.

The destination of the attempted calls was her voicemail. Lee Joohwan, who had boasted that there was no way she would talk

during the first few attempts, grounded his teeth after the fifth. His face was distorted and his cheeks convulsed subtly.

"What the hell? What is she doing that she's not answering her phone?!"

"Hey, this won't do. You can't have a scandal with a non-celebrity. Doing noise marketing by pulling a hot topic maker like Lee Songha in and being exposed in a scandal with a non-celebrity are completely different! Your fans will all leave! And if they mention the post you wrote...!"

"Motherfucker, it's her voicemail again! Where the fuck does she put her phone?!"

Both had anxious expressions and they said whatever was on their mind.

Lee Joohwan shook his leg restlessly as he made his umpteenth attempt.

"Uhh, hyung, hyung! There's an article!"

The youngest member, who had been on his tablet, shouted.

Everyone was gathered in front of the tablet in an instant. While multiple pairs of eyes read the article, a suffocating silence hung in the living room.

His face ashen, Lee Joohwan opened and closed his mouth.

The chief rushed into another room while holding his vibrating phone.

Then the main vocalist of the group glanced at Lee Joohwan before saying,

“We’re really fucked.”

As if this was a signal, Lee Joohwan began swearing loudly.

*

The sky was unusually clear and fair.

Since so many things occurred during the night, I was sleep deprived, but my mood was as bright as the sky.

Holding bagels and coffee I bought at a nearby café, I entered Neptune’s residence. The girls gathered in on the rug in the living room looked at me.

Although I told them that things ended well early morning, they looked terrible, clearly having spent the night awake.

With sunken eyes like a zombie's, Im Seoyoung staggered her way towards me.

"Opppaaa, just what happened last night?"

"A lot happened last night. But why are you girls like that? Did you not sleep?"

Im Seoyoung gulped down her saliva.

"Yes. We were readying our hearts because we thought a storm was coming."

"Although a storm did come, it passed by us."

I answered with a grin. Only then did Im Seoyoung's complexion brighten.

LJ, who had been tapping at her laptop on one side of the rug, smirked as she said,

"That storm, it seems it went to Punchline. There's a huge fuss."

Well, it did deal a strong blow to Punchline.

While netizens with nothing to do were spreading screenshots of Lee Joohwan's post and driving Lee Songha into a corner, G-Today

took the post and released an exclusive article that included Lee Joohwan's date.

Follow-up and aggregate articles were published after that. Like how Team Leader Park intended, Lee Joohwan's image completely went to shit and many fans who called him 'our oppa' left him.

Even though we didn't act, Lee Joohwan and his company desperately explained the post he had uploaded. Only then would he look a little less like trash. Either way; because of their explanation and Team Leader Park's media manipulation, those who were on a witch hunt against Lee Songha retreated.

While the other girls were looking at the articles and comments about Lee Joohwan, I placed a bagel in front of Lee Songha. Then I asked,

"Were you waiting?"

"Yes, I was."

Lee Songha said while smiling brightly as the sky.

*

"What do you want to do?"

The director scratched his chin while asking.

The team 2 leader and Chief Jo were sitting on the sofa across from him. After taking a sip of steaming tea, the team 2 leader spoke. The speech he had prepared to persuade the director flowed out from his mouth.

"Lee Songha, it's an important time for her right now. It's not rare for those who debut brilliantly with a successful first project and disappear after dull projects afterwards. If we want to take care of her properly from now on, it's better to assign a veteran to her."

"So, instead of Lucky Charm, she will be assigned to you, Chief Jo?"

The director asked while blowing on his tea.

Chief Jo, whose complexion had brightened a little, readily nodded his head.

"Since Chaeyoung's situation right now is a bit... There's no need for me to be in charge of her right now."

The team 2 leader added,

"Lee Songha will be busier from now on, and if she wants to properly take steps into the drama and film world, a bunch of problems will crop up suddenly. We can't keep leaving it to Jung Sunwoo. Since Lee Bongjoon was there with him, there wasn't a

problem with Cat Guardian Ghost, but he'll have to face problems by himself in the future. He's just a rookie with five months of experience, do you think he can handle it?"

"Did you not hear about what happened last night?"

The director abruptly asked.

"Last night?"

"I saw that Lee Songha's name was rising up and down in the articles... It didn't seem like a big deal."

At Chief Jo's reply, the director clicked his tongue and continued to speak.

"From what Team Leader Park says that Lucky Charm handled a scandal concerning Lee Songha that would have given us a rough time this early in the year. Considering he's a five-month rookie, he's good."

"No, still..."

"Don't incite someone who's doing his job properly and let him be."

Unsatisfied, the team 2 leader began to speak, but the director looked at Chief Jo as if he didn't need to hear any more.

“Also, why are you guys acting like this? Chaeyoung pestered the CEO to assign Lucky Charm to her, and you want Lee Songha? If you really want to change who you’re assigned to, then get Lee Songha’s approval.”

Chief Jo, who had been sitting scrunched in his seat, suddenly raised his head.

“Will you assign her to me if I persuade her?”

“I’ll think about it if you get her approval.”

That night, Chief Jo called out to Lee Songha, who was exhausted from preparing for their next album in the basement practice room. Then they sat across from each other in a small meeting room. With a brightly smiling face, Chief Jo talked about the data he had prepared ahead of time.

The conversation only went on for about ten minutes.

After ten minutes, Lee Songha returned to the practice room with no change to her normal appearance. Chief Jo left the meeting room only after a long time had passed.

From that day onwards, Chief Jo didn’t bring up the topic of changing the celebrity he was in charge of.

Chapter 89: Symbol of Happiness (1)

{‘Neptune’ will make a comeback soon! Expected to reveal their full-length recording at midnight today!}

The girl group Neptune is about to make a comeback.

Neptune’s mini-album, which received a lot of interest due to the hit songwriter Simon Lee’s involvement, will finally be unveiled. Celebrating the release of their second mini-album ‘Guardian’, Neptune will host a press showcase and conference today (the 3rd) and is expected to signal the start of their comeback.

This 5-song mini-album consists of double title tracks: Simon Lee’s unique rhythmical, clear pop dance song ‘Pisces’ and Neptune’s leader Lee Taehee’s song ‘Satellite’.

Their full-length recording and music videos are expected to be revealed on various online music sites midnight today.

-Oh, my god. After looking into it, this is their fifth album. They really failed a lot.

-Looking at their list of songs, it’s like a public cemetery. All buried.

-Whether their album is a success or failure this time is really important. Looking at Lee Songha’s drama and Im Seoyoung’s entertainment show reactions, they seem to have individual

potential. If they slip up, the team might disband. They need to have a hit song this time.

-If their album flops this time as well, the heavens have abandoned them.

-With Lee Songha's buff and Simon Lee's song, I don't think they'll flop though?

-It's not like they are a boy idol group, Lee Songha's buff won't work on the music charts.

-To have good music chart performance, you either need to have incredible fandom firepower where they systematically stream your songs or have such a good song that it gobbles up other fandoms.

-Still, since their popularity is different from before, it'll be worth seeing.

-Let's not make a fuss and just wait and see. We'll be able to make a conclusion midnight today.

Sangam District KS Move Hall.

Dim purple lights scattered inside the dark hall. The enormous LED screen set up for their performance played a shooting star graphic.

Around two hundred members of the media filled the first and second-floor seating areas designated for the press

Journalists placed their laptops on the table and wrote articles in real-time. This was so that they could add a few keywords once the showcase began and publish them before others.

“How good will they perform on the charts? It’s the peak season. Since the top ranks of the charts are set, it’ll be difficult to pass tenth place, right?”

“Success, decent, and complete flop. I should write all three versions.”

“Getting into 20-30th rank is a success. If their songs are good, then their rank will go up as they appear on music broadcasts and entertainment shows. I bet they already have a few entertainment shows lined up?”

Murmurs could be heard here and there. There were reporters discussing Neptune’s album performance and the direction they would move towards in the future as well as reporters who were focused on gossip.

In a path away from the press area, a few reporters from celebrity gossip sites were waiting outside Neptune’s waiting room. Looking at the firmly shut door, a young female reporter said in an irritated manner,

“So quiet. The chief reporter threw a fit telling me to grab an exclusive.”

“They are coming out without any break, right? If they became chubbier or if their faces were swollen, I could write a story with that. There are no signs of discord within the team, right?”

“I hope one of them cries. Then it’ll be easier to write up a lead.”

“Hey, hey.”

The murmuring reporters looked to one side before shutting their mouths.

A man wearing a thin knit sweater rolled up to his elbows was walking towards them with steady steps. The reporters instantly recognized his face. Jung Sunwoo. This was because he was the target of the articles they scrambled to publish during the long weekend.

Unlike others from W&U, who ran around with tense faces before the showcase, he was on the phone with someone, talking so leisurely that it was strange.

“I’m on my way there with the cue cards. I’ll prepare the girls with anticipated questions. Ah, Gunyoung and the PR team are going to check the route and guide the MC. Once the showcase ends, we need to take a picture with the MC-“

“Excuse me!”

He was someone worth writing about among those related to W&U. The reporters scrambled towards him.

“Could I ask you a few questions about Neptune’s future activities?”

“How about Lee Songha’s own activities? Are there any projects you are looking into as her next project?”

“There are rumors that Simon Lee and Neptune will appear on entertainment shows together as supporting fire. The reactions from Star Manager have yet to die down, do you have any plans on appearing alongside them?”

To the outpour of questions, Jung Sunwoo said,

“I’m a bit busy right now.”

Then he used his chin to gesture at his phone, which he was still holding.

“Since there will be a joint interview time with Neptune soon, please ask your questions then.”

Unable to say a word, the reporters simply opened and closed

their mouths. Even though his tone wasn't threatening or unpleasant, it felt it would be difficult to stick next to him.

A female reporter smacked her lips as she saw Jung Sunwoo's fading appearance.

"I saw him at a music broadcast in the past. I should have gotten close to him then."

*

As soon as I opened the waiting room door, I was met with a heavy atmosphere.

It even felt like gravity was different starting from the door. Although today was the day Neptune was revealing their songs, W&U employees had also spent the past few months for this day as well. Everyone inside the waiting was tense like a drawn bowstring.

"Mr. Sunwoo! Where were you? You were in the middle of a call when I tried to call you."

A female PR team employee rushed towards me.

"Why? Did something happen?"

"The girls have been looking for you since a while ago."

“The girls?”

When I entered the waiting room, I flinched because the scene in front of me looked so unrealistic.

After finishing their makeup and changing into their outfits, the girls were sitting on the sofa and dressing table chairs.

The outfit was made to match the album concept. It was an elegant yet combatant-style dress, giving off a conflicting feeling. Should I say they looked like they would appear in myths? Or like they should hold a harp in one hand and a bow in the other?

“I heard you were looking for me?”

When I asked after clearing my throat, Im Seoyoung, who was hugging her legs on the sofa, looked at me. There was no point to making her look lovely since her expression seemed like she was possessed by an evil spirit. She looked like she needed an exorcism.

“Oppa, is it raining outside?”

“Yeah, why?”

The sky looked murky since morning, and it started drizzling not too long ago. It was the first rainfall indicating spring. I even thought that spring had actually come when I saw rain dripping

from the windows.

However, the girls' moods seemed more uneasy for some reason.

It wasn't only Im Seoyoung, they all looked unhappy.

"Why are you all like this?"

"Oppa, we have a sad tradition on rainy days."

"It is a sad tradition. One you can hold your tears back when listening to it."

Im Seoyoung said, and LJ added with her lips askew.

Although I wasn't sure what it was, I decided to match their tune.

"What kind of tradition?"

"The day we made a comeback with a digital single last fall. It rained that day too."

"… So?"

"We thought it would become a hit since we worked hard on it. We revealed the song at midnight that time too so we waited with

wide-open eyes, but it was still raining then. We didn't know at the time, but that was the start of our misfortune."

Recalling that day, Im Seoyoung's eyes narrowed.

It seemed like someone should add a thunder sound in the background.

"As soon as it turned 12, our song was released, but do you know what rank it placed?"

From what I heard, it was around 80-something.

"87th. Then it dropped out of the charts two hours later."

"Ah."

Im Seoyoung buried her face in her hands as she despaired.

"But, it's raining today as well! It's the symbol of misfortune to us. We don't have a good feeling. That's why we were looking for oppa as an emergency measure."

"Sorry, I don't have the power to stop the rain."

"Not that. Oppa is our lucky snake! Symbol of happiness! Staying next to you will neutralize the misfortune. If I could, I want to boil

and drink you up! Oppa, you probably don't understand how I feel!"

"I know that you aren't in your right mind right now."

Well, when looking at it psychologically, I could understand how they felt since they reduced their sleep and were hung up on this for months in preparation for today.

Relaxing my body, I leaned against the sofa.

If I could act as a placebo by just staying next to them, then why not?

"Okay, do what you want. Besides boiling me up."

Since I easily accepted, she was taken aback. Im Seoyoung hesitantly came up to me and poked my shoulder and arm with her thumb.

Other staff members took pictures of this from afar, saying that they had to take pictures, upload them onto social media, and spread them amongst reporters.

Then, unsure when he arrived, Kim Hyunjo chuckled saying that I was like a '[stone grandfather]'. The thing that would help you give birth a son if you rubbed his nose.

I sat after emptying my heart, but Lee Songha, who was sitting next to me, handed me a chocolate snack. I was used to receiving food from Lee Songha. Tasting the sweet chocolate covering my tongue, I asked in a joking manner,

"Why Songha, do you need anything from me?"

"No, I'm good with this."

Lee Songha came closer to me. Then, while closing her eyes, she said,

"I'm becoming calmer."

I prepped the girls with anticipated questions. During this time, Im Seoyoung calmed down so I no longer had to act as a 'stone grandfather'. While I was looking around to check if there were any other problems with them, Lee Taehee suddenly tapped my back.

"Oppa, one moment."

After saying that in a quiet voice, she entered the dressing room where hangers were set up. I followed behind her. Lee Taehee rubbed her lips with her finger. Her eyes, which were always calm like an autumn lake in front of the girls, were rippling.

"Will it really go well?"

“Why? Does the sad rain tradition weigh on you too?”

Lee Taehee smiled slightly.

“No, I kept thinking that I should have worked on the song more.”

“Don’t worry. Your song is good, and the rehearsal went well. The reporters’ reactions will be good too.”

I said while smiling. Lee Taehee coughed lightly and said,

“Once more.”

“Your song is good, and the rehearsal went well. The reporters’ reactions will be good too.”

“Once more please.”

“Your song is…”

“Last time.”

After repeating those words five times, we finally left the dressing room.

Lee Taehee, now with a relieved expression after letting out her worries, returned to being the always calm leader as she examined the cue cards.

Smiling, I sat back down on the sofa when LJ, who had been playing a game on her phone, bolted up. She came up to me taking long strides before crossing her arms and looking down at me.

“What’s up with you? What do you want?”

LJ slowly licked her lips. Then she stretched her hand out and touched my hair. I instinctively pulled my head back. I couldn’t let my guard down in front of her.

I frowned trying to figure out what she was up to when LJ said,

“Please cut a piece of your head.”

What kind of fresh nonsense was this?

“Ah, not your head, but your hair.”

“Why my hair?”

“I feel like it’ll be effective as a talisman. A talisman of luck?”

LJ’s lips curled into a smile. I clearly knew one thing. Unlike

other girls, she wasn't saying this because she was nervous. She was definitely doing this because she thought it would be fun.

As soon as her words left her mouth, three pairs of eyes landed on me. Im Seoyoung, who had been smitten at the mention of a 'talisman', was the first to rush towards me as though she was about to do a 'hundred and eight bows'.

"Oppa, me too! Me too! I want one strand!"

"Since you're pulling hair out anyway, one for me too."

"... I want two, no, three strands."

In the end, I had to pull out a few strands of perfectly fine hair.

*

Dozens of idols debuted each year. If you added all the other singers who unveiled their own showcase for their comeback, this number was over a hundred.

That was why reporters were used to and even bored of idol group showcases. It was a boring event akin to replaying a video you had already seen.

What reporters were waiting for wasn't a monotonous performance. They simply could comment on the new songs by

extracting information from the press release sent out by W&U's PR team ahead of time.

What the reporters were really interested in was the press conference that followed afterwards. What kind of questions should they ask during the press conference to obtain an article-worthy remark from the members?

Because of this, when Neptune went up on the stage and greeted them, the reporters were focused on their laptops.

However, not long after their first performance began, the reporters began to raise their heads one after another.

"Wow... This isn't an audio recording but live, right? They are skilled."

"Their skills were confirmed on Next K-Star. But I heard Songha was less skilled, yet when looking at them in person, she's fine? Their stage composition is good and so is their performance. This is the best out of the showcases I've been to this year."

"The song is good too. It's this one, right? The one Simon Lee made?"

"If it's like this, it's worth W&U promoting them aggressively. If they are lucky, this will probably perform well."

Murmurs could be heard from the press seating areas.

Among them, there were reporters who nodded their heads after becoming absorbed in the song, and there were also people who truly felt it was a regret that the performance ended.

As if comforting their regret, the second performance began.

It was a dynamic and powerful rhythm, however, a fleeting violin tune added an emotional aspect to the song.

It was a performance which melded Neptune members' unique tones as well as their outfits and choreography that made one think of something other than humans. The word 'divine' best described this scene.

By the time their performance ended, a reporter mumbled,

"... What the heck? Is this Simon Lee's song?"

"This is Lee Taehee's song. From the press release, it says she composed and wrote it herself. I thought they mentioned this to add an 'artist' image on top of being a talented girl group, but it's better than I thought?"

"Better than you thought? I like this one better than Simon Lee's song."

When the joint interview began, questions popped up

everywhere without rest. It was to the point the MC overseeing this event was astonished. Although he had attended a few showcases, it was his first time attending one with so many questions.

"Ms. Lee Taehee's song was chosen as one of the double title tracks. Is there any story behind the songwriting process?"

At a reporter's question, Lee Taehee, who was sitting at the center of the table on the stage, raised her mic.

"There is because, if it wasn't for manager oppa, my song wouldn't have even been included in this album."

"By manager, do you perhaps mean... Mr. Jung Sunwoo?"

"Yes."

Smelling the scent of something article-worthy, the reporters' fingers worked faster. On their laptop screens were leads like 'The story behind Lee Taehee's Song', 'Lee Taehee's song, if it wasn't for her manager.'

Lee Taehee brushed her light brown hair and continued,

"I was in a slump during the songwriting process, but manager oppa came to our residence. He gave me something as a present, and when I looked inside, there were alcohol and snacks... He said he bought everything in the store aisle."

“Why alcohol?”

“Ah, drinking while working became a habit for me. He told me to pick and drink whatever I wanted while handing it to me, and thanks to that, I finished the song in two days.”

Her somewhat cold-looking eyes narrowed to form a gentle smile.

“After that, he even pushed for my song to be included as part of the double title tracks. If this song obtains good results, it’s all thanks to manager oppa.”

*

“The rain has stopped.”

I said while entering the practice room. The Neptune girls, who were lolling around after becoming exhausted from practicing, and Kim Hyunjo and the traitor, who were talking on one side, looked at me at the same time.

Widening her eyes, Im Seoyoung said,

“Our misfortune has ended now.”

“R-really? The rain really stopped?”

“Yeah. The rain stopped and a ray of light shined in the sky.”

“Really?”

“That one’s a lie.”

The girls laughed like deflating balloons.

When I went to where Kim Hyunjo and the traitor were, I saw that they had their laptops and cellphones out and were in the middle of monitoring reactions.

After the showcase and press conference ended, articles about Neptune’s comeback poured out onto portal news sites like a broken dam.

The PR team was putting in their last remaining effort into promotions, and social media and community forum sites were bustling with talks concerning Neptune’s comeback.

Online music chart tabs were lined up on one laptop.

“What rank will they reach? I hope they hit at least 50.”

“Some songs shoot through the graph as soon as they’re released.”

When I said so while smacking my lips, Kim Hyunjo coughed.

“What ‘shooting through the graph’? Do you think songs can hit the ceiling whenever they want? While it’s good to hold expectations, do it in moderation. It hurts more if you fall from a high place.”

“Still, it’s not like there is zero possibility of it happening.”

This time it was the traitor who spoke. A strange excitement radiated from his eyes.

“If they reach 10-20th rank, it’ll go up higher as they appear on broadcasts. As long as they do well on entertainment shows, can’t we aim for first?”

“Yeah, we might be able to aim for first.”

I agreed.

Of course, the song the traitor and I were thinking of was different.

Awaiting midnight, we huddled around the computer. I heard someone gulp from somewhere. I also heard someone pant heavily while pressing their chest and a strange groan escaped from being unable to endure any longer.

Everyone was calming their excitement in their own way. I licked my lips slightly. A pleasant excitement surrounded my body.

The minute hand slowly tilted. Then, the moment it precisely hit midnight, Neptune's second mini-album was released.

The mini-album is called '수호성 (guardian)', but since the two are redundant, just wrote 'Guardian'.

Statues on Jeju Island and are considered to be gods of protection and fertility. There's a saying 'if you rub the stone grandfather's nose, you'll give birth to a son.'

A Buddhist meditative practice for reflection and concentration.

Probably referring to the muses in myth.

Chapter 90: Symbol of Happiness (2)

Everyone's gazes turned towards the screen.

A familiar album cover appeared in the 'new song' category of the music site. When we clicked it, the five tracks we had listened to again and again while preparing for the album appeared. The two title tracks were marked with a 'title' indicator.

In the review column of the music site, which possessed the largest share in the national music market, the comments of people who were waiting for the album to release were uploaded in real-time.

Looking at reviews, such as 'I can tell it is high quality just by listening to the intro' and 'Go Neptune!', my heartbeat quickened a little as well. Maybe it was because we could see the real-time rankings, but it was a completely different sensation compared to entertainment shows or dramas.

How high would they go?

"Chief, when will the 5-minute prediction chart go up?"

At my question, Kim Hyunjo smirked.

"Hey, you. The 5-minute prediction chart is only for the first, second, and third places."

“It might be one of them.”

“Hey, hey. It seems your standards have reached the top of your head because Cat Guardian Ghost became a historic success, but hitting the top of music charts, that’s not as easy as it sounds.”

Kim Hyunjo glossed over it while laughing, but I was serious. The ‘shooting through the graph’ talk from before wasn’t a joke either.

Of course, I knew it wouldn’t be easy since the number of downloads and streams would have to surge past the graph. If this was so easy, there was no reason for singers to be so anxious when releasing their songs.

Still, my expectations of ‘just maybe’ had already crawled up to my throat.

This album was expected to succeed. Their popularity had already increased enough to shed their ‘rookie’ label. They were promoted well too. Wasn’t it enough to aim for a brilliant rank with this?

However, these were only my thoughts, the reactions were lukewarm.

“Maybe it’s because oppa took seven bowlfuls of kimchi soup, I feel relaxed instead.”

Im Seoyoung smiled while poking my side. The other girls were

the same. The girls said their simple wishes, which was hoping for their album to be in the top 50 so that it appeared on the first page.

The only person who held such high expectations in this room was me. No, the traitor and me.

Soon, Kim Hyunjo said,

“Here you go, the 5-minute prediction graph.”

I hurriedly looked at the screen.

Then I unconsciously frowned. It wasn’t there. Neptune’s name wasn’t on the prediction graph for the first, second, and third places. Even though others told me not to get ahead of myself, I still thought there was a chance.

Then what rank was it?

Just as I was divining the next number, the real-time chart updated.

“Believing we’re within the top 50, I’m going to go up from the 50^{th} rank.”

“Oppa, quickly, quickly! I feel like I’m going to get a heart attack!”

“If it’s not in the top 50?”

“Hey! Are you going to say such unlucky words even at a time like this? What are you going to do if your words come true? Quickly touch Sunwoo oppa and nullify your words!”

Facing such a fiery temper, LJ lightly touched my arm in the end.

Kim Hyunjo suddenly said,

“It’s here. 42nd.”

What?

While the girls were shouting, I almost made a strange sound. If Kim Hyunjo didn’t continue speaking, I might have called the music site to ask if there was a problem with the count.

“What in the world? It’s not one of the title tracks.”

“... It’s not one of our title tracks? And it reached 42nd? May-maybe the count is wrong?”

Surprised by her own words, Im Seoyoung grabbed my arm.

The paused screen began to scroll up again. Kim Hyunjo seemed nervous as I heard the mouse wheel click a few times. Soon, the mouse stopped twice.

35th and 33rd. The places of two other non-title tracks.

At this point, the mood in the practice room wasn't just heated, even our skin felt like it was burning. If someone threw a lighter, it would cause a chain explosion. No one could utter a word as they stared at the screen with widened eyes.

We kept scrolling up. Neptune's album cover didn't appear in the twenties. As soon as the first digit changed to a one, I heard people gulping around me.

Just then, we stopped scrolling completely.

"... Here it is. Am I dreaming?"

"It-it's probably a dream, right? Right? Right, unni?"

"I think so. Oppa, check another site."

"Euah, Sunwoo oppa must truly be the symbol of happiness! His hair must really be effective. If not, there is no way this could happen!"

"The company isn't buying up the album, is it? I heard a lot

about that these days.”

The mood surged. Everyone’s cheeks were dyed red with excitement, and their voices became louder as they resounded throughout the practice room.

It seemed Im Seoyoung was overwhelmed with fifty thousand emotions as she stomped her feet with tears in her eyes. LJ was persistently asking Kim Hyunjo about the company buying up their album, and Lee Taehee took champagne out from her bag. Lee Songha held glasses and food in her hands.

Although the traitor seemed a little sad, he was enjoying this festive mood. The only one who couldn’t join in was me.

I checked the screen once more. There was no change.

Lee Taehee’s song ‘Satellite’ was 14th.

Simon Lee’s song ‘Virgo’ was 11th.

These were the ranks of our title tracks.

I greeted the dimly brightening morning with open eyes.

My head was so complicated that I only looked at my phone throughout the night. Opening the music app, I checked how the

real-time chart rankings changed every hour.

Fortunately, they increased as time passed, but the increase was smaller than I hoped.

The morning rankings were Satellite at 11th and Virgo at 10th.

Objectively, this was a successful entry since Kim Hyunjo and the girls bathed in happiness while popping champagne late into the night and we received texts of relief and congratulations from other employees, including the team 3 leader and the PR team, saying that these ranks were good.

That was why this was a successful entry into the charts. If I didn't know the original future, then I too would be happy about this success and be drinking champagne until I collapsed. However, the future and the conversation I had heard endlessly entangled in my head, preventing me from celebrating.

It felt like I failed to grab something that was within reach.

Were my expectations just too high from the start? Did it reach 10th originally?

However, considering it was a hit song that would place first on a music broadcast, wasn't its start too weak? Would something happen that would make it rise abruptly or climb back up the chart?

Or was it because I changed the album to include double tracks, which was different from the future? Did the rank halt early because public interest was divided?

While biting my lower lip, I checked the album review column again.

-All the songs are of good quality. W&U also made the album so pretty that I might have to own one as a photo album!

-I was worried Neptune might flop again, but if it's like this, they've burst from their coffins.

-I think the key point is to maintain these ranks for the long run and prevent them from dropping. They need to hold out.

-Since their songs are so good, I don't think they'll suddenly drop from the ranking. Their non-title tracks are all within the top 40, and since their two title tracks are also in the rankings, I hope that they can keep them up by going on as many entertainment shows and music broadcasts as they can.

-Lee Taehee's song's amazing, isn't it? I think it's the best out of them. I'm replaying it non-stop.

-I second Lee Taehee's song. I understand why they went with two title tracks.

-To be honest, they are songs that can go up higher, but they are

lacking the firepower.

-Since this is only the first day, I believe there is a chance they'll go up even higher.

The comments regarding the quality of the album were very positive. Its rating was on the high end with 4.8 stars. Even in community sites and on social media, favorable comments were the absolute majority. If they could gain momentum through broadcasts in this situation and if it spreads through word of mouth, then it might go up even higher.

This was what I thought while rubbing my dry lips.

Yeah, let's wait and see a while longer.

Once we jumped into the torrent of schedules, I no longer had time to leisurely get lost in my thoughts. Although we scheduled as many as we could so that we could bring more exposure to the girls and their new songs, after trying to keep up with the schedule personally, there was no schedule more hellish than this.

Public network and cable music broadcasts, celebratory performances on cultural programs, as well as smaller events besides them, they performed multiple times a day. We even held autograph events to increase album sales.

Days of waking up early in the morning, putting on makeup, running around all day, and sleeping early in the morning

continued. The girls were astonished, saying that this was the busiest they had ever been since they debuted, but they seemed to welcome their busy schedule as they were lively every day.

Still, the song ranks increased slowly due to the effort they put in.

When the talk show they appeared on with Simon Lee was broadcasted, I inwardly had high hopes. Even though it was a group talk show with tons of celebrity guests talking, it was still a 1-hour public network entertainment show like Star Manager.

However, it completely lacked impact compared to Star Manager. While I was monitoring the broadcast, I thought my eyes would fall out from trying to find Neptune in the full shots since their faces didn't come up on the screen nearly enough.

Yet, since it was still on a public network, Virgo climbed up to 6^{th} right after the broadcast and Satellite reached 8^{th}.

Although it was slow, I had been suppressing my nervousness by looking at the ranks going up one by one. Yet, the insufficient ranks suddenly began to fall.

Unexpectedly, it was because of Sugar Cats.

"This is BYG's fandom's firepower."

Kim Hyunjo said while clicking his tongue. Sugar Cats' digital single, which they released at midnight, was playing on his laptop. Sugar Cats was definitely a 3-person group, yet male voices were heard more often.

"Even putting the cart before the horse this much is embarrassing. How is this Sugar Cats' song featuring BYG? Anyone who listens to it will think the Sugar Cats were featured in BYG's song. BYG's fans are the only ones promoting the song on social media too. Even their fandom doesn't consider this as Sugar Cats' song."

As soon as Sugar Cats' song featuring BYG members was released, it reached third. Past noon, it was now at second. Since they were performing this well, their album sales shouldn't be low, and if they appeared on broadcasts with BYG, it would become even trendier.

At this rate, Sugar Cats were more likely to be first on the music broadcast than Neptune. Just where did things go wrong? I didn't know where I should start in order to flip the situation around.

The Neptune members who were satisfied with being in the top 10 were at a loss for words when they heard the news. Especially Im Seoyoung, she became limp like a lifeless jellyfish.

We would have to meet Sugar Cats during their next music broadcast, but it put a bad taste in my mouth thinking of their proud faces.

“Just looking at the songs, ours is better. Fandoms are a cheat, a cheat. The Sugar Cats weren’t even expected to have BYG featured in their song, what is this all of a sudden…?”

Kim Hyunjo’s words nailed into my ears like a dart.

“Featuring BYG wasn’t expected?”

“They weren’t planning on an album from the start, but I hear they changed midway.”

What a pot of confusion.

Sugar Cats’ high music chart ranking, featuring BYG, did these events occur in the original future? Or did the present change?”

I recalled Sugar Cats, who I saw last at Next K-Star’s concert. They had disappeared looking like they had swallowed a bug. They said that they would make a comeback at the same time as us as though they were telling us to watch out.

If they had pulled BYG into this because they had a grudge against Neptune, who was continuing to rise after Star Manager, then this clearly didn’t happen in the original future. The present had changed.

Out of the frying pan into the fire, I already had a headache because Neptune’s ranks were lower than I expected, but for another variable to pop up. I felt like my head would explode from

overcapacity.

Yeah. Another variable was added to the mix, what should I do from now on?

For this album to reach the level of success of the original future and for Lee Taehee's song to be known as a hit song and reach first on music broadcasts, how could I expose their new songs to the public in an effective way so that interest in them rises?

While I was pondering about this, my phone rang. It was a text.

I thought it was another congratulatory message, but it was from a writer who had contacted me a few times in the past.

-Mr. Manager, when do you think the internal meetings will decide? We are awaiting a favorable response. Since a new album has been released, if you appear alongside Neptune, we will pay careful attention to use their songs as part of the background music and even display their music video.

As soon as I checked the message, I turned to Kim Hyunjo.

Although I didn't know how helpful I would be, I had to do everything I could.

"Chief, you remember the entertainment shows that asked me to appear as well, right? The ones we put on hold for now."

“Yeah, why?”

“I’ll go on them.”

Similar to ‘counting your chickens before they hatch’ or ‘getting ahead of yourself’. I kept it literal since the author is playing with the idiom by saying it wasn’t just some Kimchi soup, but seven bowlfuls!

Chapter 91: Symbol of Happiness (3)

When would we be scheduled for entertainment shows? What kind of concepts would they have?

Since we were really lucky with Star Manager last time, it would probably be too greedy to expect that much again. I didn't know how effective playing their songs in the background or playing their music video for 15 seconds would be.

If there was a way to naturally show their songs during a program...

"Okay, cut!"

While I was lost in my thoughts, the filming director shouted with a satisfied expression.

I tapped my head a few times and cleared my thoughts. Due to thinking of the same thoughts at every opportunity during the past few days, my head felt so heavy that it was difficult to carry it on top of my neck.

"Good work everyone!"

As soon as the filming ended, dozens of staff members cheered with exhausted faces. Even the Neptune girls flopped on the grass, exhausted from shoots for magazines, TV, and behind-the-scenes footage for marketing purposes.

I checked the time when the filming director started a conversation with a shine in his small eyes.

“I was worried that the girls would be overshadowed because the background was so good today, but there’s nothing to edit. I heard all Neptune members had great appearances, but there’s nothing to throw out since they would be picture-perfect whenever we filmed them.”

“Thank you. It’s all thanks to your filming skills.”

“The new album concept, songs, and reactions were all good. Congratulations. I’ve been hearing Neptune’s name in the advertising industry these days. I know they worked hard, and now they’ll finally get to shine.”

I heard this wherever I went these days. I did my best to smile while thanking them and acting modestly. It would be great if the conversation ended here, but the director glanced at the girls and added,

“Since the shoot ended well, why don’t we have an afterparty to get closer to each other? With those businessmen over there as well. The Neptune members drink, right? A 3-month single advertisement becomes a 6-month one or even a year-long one at events like this.”

I also heard this a lot these days. Although it seemed there were companies who pushed their girl groups into these situations, our

policy was to create an impenetrable defense.

“Ah, we have a schedule early in the morning tomorrow so it’ll be difficult today.”

After making an empty promise that we should schedule one when the opportunity arose, I distanced myself from the director. It seemed the advertising employees held some expectations as well as they were smacking their lips. There were a lot of men who didn’t act their age in this industry, wanting to play with girl group members who were young enough to be their daughters.

“Heeey, oppa.”

When I approached the girls, Im Seoyoung hesitantly called out to me.

“What?”

“We don’t have a schedule right after, right? Can we stay here for a bit longer?”

“Why were you hesitant when saying that? Since this was an advertising shoot, I cleared the schedule because we didn’t know when it’ll end so it’s fine, but isn’t it better to go home and sleep a little?”

Their schedule was packed tomorrow. I could take a nap by switching with the traitor, but the girls had to run around the

stage in heels as though they were in their best condition regardless of whether they were sleep deprived or not.

“Sleep is good too, but we won’t be able to come here again.”

Im Seoyoung looked at the film environment reluctantly.

The grass field warmed by the sun. Splendid cherry blossom trees and a tranquil pond piled with cherry blossoms. This garden, which the location manager painstakingly chose for the commercial shoot, was as beautiful as an illustration in a children’s book.

Lee Taehee, who was lying on the ground like a plant undergoing photosynthesis, said while scratching her neck,

“I think it’ll be nice to relax for a bit before leaving. It’s been a long time since we’ve seen cherry blossoms up so close.”

“Oppa should rest too. You looked very tired these days.”

Lee Songha added. LJ silently looked at me, but her body was already stuck to the grass, clearly indicating she had no intentions of leaving.

“Okay, let’s do that then.”

After asking for the advertising team’s understanding, I bought a

bit of time. Then I sat on a bench and took out my phone while the girls were resting on the grass. My fingers pressed the music website app on their own.

I clicked my tongue after confirming the ranks didn't change much since last time.

A shadow dropped in front of me. When I raised my head, LJ was looking at me with her head tilted to the side.

As expected of a girl who did sports as a hobby, she could handle most schedules easily, but she seemed slightly different today. Should I say she looked stifled, no, it looked more like she was parched?

Seeing that sodas, which was the product they were advertising, were lying around, I was about to offer her one when-

"I'm suffering from frustration because of you, oppa."

I dropped the soda and it rolled on the ground.

"Because of me? Why?"

"Er, smile a little. Everyone's reading oppa's mood more than the CEO's."

I unconsciously touched my face and blinked.

“Me? Why?”

LJ sat down next to me. She crossed her legs out of habit and placed her arm on the back of the bench, then she stared at me with narrowed eyes.

“You look like you’re disappointed in us.”

“… What?”

“You’re disappointed because our album performance isn’t up to your expectations. How can we not notice after experiencing multiple failed albums?”

My words hovered on top of my tongue.

“Taehee unni has difficulty bringing it up because her song is a title track. Lee Songha’s just digging a hole for herself. And Im Seoyoung’s expression distorts like a rain-soaked mouse whenever you check the music charts.”

While shaking her crossed leg, she clicked her tongue.

“That’s why teasing her is not fun anymore. That was my greatest source of energy. I can’t relieve my frustration these days. I might cause trouble like this.”

Although she joked at the end, it wasn't a joke.

I felt like cold water was poured on me. I turned my gaze and looked at the other girls. Lee Taehee and Lee Songha were talking to each other while lying down leisurely, and Im Seoyoung was enjoying herself by gathering cherry blossoms and scattering them over the girls.

When I thought back, her words seemed to be true.

The girls seemed stiffer around me recently. I didn't know they were concerned about my actions. Since they didn't look any different, no, because my mind was complicated, I seemed to have glossed over it by thinking they were the same as usual.

"Sorry. I thought the song was really good and felt regretful when looking at its rank. It's because I was greedy. I'm not disappointed in you girls. I didn't know you girls were minding me so much. Thank you for telling me."

"I read your mood too even though I'm not the type to."

She said apathetically before getting up and brushing herself off. Then she joined the other girls and pulled Im Seoyoung's hair. Annoyed, she grumbled irritably before glancing at me. Lee Taehee and Lee Songha were looking at me as well.

I smiled out of reflex.

The concerns and worries that entangled my mind dispersed.

I had been a bit impatient. The reason why I changed the present was to pioneer a better future, but when a situation turned worse, I became preoccupied with the thought of having to correct the situation. I became so focused on the future that I didn't see the present.

The girls worked very hard and their current performance was great enough that they should be happy and proud, but I almost ruined everything.

I stood up while scratching my head. I walked towards the girls and sat on the grass. Their clear eyes, which made me wonder why I hadn't noticed until now, stuck to me. I stretched before lying down on the grass.

"Let's watch the cherry blossoms to our fill before going. There are too many people at the cherry blossom road in Yeouido that we won't be able to go together. And it'll be troublesome if people recognize you and swarm around us. It's great your album's a hit, but this part's a little regretful."

At my words, my surroundings temporarily became silent. Soon, Lee Songha rolled over towards me. Then Im Seoyoung said with twitching lips,

"Umm, oppa. I talked with my mom on the phone and she said that she heard our song twice when she went out yesterday."

“Really? I should go around some time. Oh right, I don’t have the time.”

“Also, the members on our fan page increase a ton. When I secretly go check when they are chatting, the fans…”

Im Seoyoung’s voice gradually became livelier. Soon, other voices joined in and their laughter tickled my ears.

We lied on the grass for almost an hour while chatting about all sorts of things. After I explained that I had been overly greedy because it was my first album, the mood became even more livelier.

I thought while lying relaxed and watching the fluttering cherry blossom trees.

To take it slow.

To not be so impatient and nervous because of the future.

Well, that was that.

My thoughts on doing whatever I could, even appearing entertainment shows, didn’t change.

If we were lucky, we might be able to gather a good reaction from the public, and if that happened, we could take the Sugar Cats,

who walked around with their noses in the air, down a notch.

"It's been a while."

The Sugar Cats members smiled as they entered our waiting room. They all had expressions that they couldn't endure their desire to want to boast. I glanced at Im Seoyoung, and she greeted them with a soulless face.

I did expect this sort of situation since I heard that Sugar Cats would have a comeback performance today. However, even though I knew, it still made me lose my appetite.

Han Saetbyeol of the Sugar Cats blinked her caterpillar-hair-like eyelashes and smiled.

"We saw the entertainment show you went on with Simon Lee. You were really working hard, but it was a shame you were edited out so much. Are you appearing on another entertainment show? We'll monitor it for you."

Like hell, you would.

I got up to make them leave before they upset Im Seoyoung any further, but LJ suddenly stood up before I could and closed the slightly opened waiting room door. She then looked at the Sugar Cats members and abruptly asked,

"Why did you come to the music broadcast?"

“What do you mean why did we come? Don’t you know we’re making a comeback?”

“You released an album, I guess?”

The Sugar Cats members, who were standing close together, showed angry expression.

“Do you live without seeing the music charts? Our song is above yours, you know?”

“Ah, that. BYG’s song you’re featured in?”

Han Saetbyeol’s eyes turned fierce at LJ’s ridiculing words. I stealthily looked around the waiting room. Well, it was fine if there were no cameras. Since she closed the door, no one would hear since it was so noisy outside.

Im Seoyoung simply looked at her with flustered eyes. Lee Taehee and Lee Songha didn’t look like they would stop her either.

“Can’t you read Korean? BYG’s featured on our song!”

“Really? I thought it was the opposite since BYG’s part took up over half the 4-minute song. Seeing as how BYG’s fans are swarming outside, it seems you are performing together, but people might think you are background dancers. Tell the staff to

put the name ‘Sugar Cats’ really big on the screen.”

“You!”

Han Saetbyeol shouted. The other girls tried their best to stifle their laughter.

“If you’re so jealous, why don’t you ask Blackout to feature on your song? Our song will take first anyways.”

“Sure. Leave if you’re done talking.”

LJ gestured with her chin. Then, as though she suddenly thought of something, she added,

“Ah, also, I’ll monitor the broadcast to check if you look like background dancers or not.”

The Sugar Cats members yapped for a while longer before leaving as though they were being chased out. I had imagined LJ, who always bickered with Im Seoyoung, as a cat, but I thought I was seeing a predatory cat today.

LJ raised her brows when she saw Im Seoyoung staring at her.

“Why? What?”

"... Nothing."

Im Seoyoung shook her head. The edges of her lips twitched.

LJ flopped on the sofa and smiled while saying,

"I wish a big star made a comeback so that they can't get first."

*

Chopsticks grabbed yukhoe.

Choi Gunyoung took a few bites before setting his chopsticks down.

"You didn't hear from him after that?"

"I gave him my business card, but I didn't hear from him again. It's already done anyways."

The man sitting in front of him said while drinking alcohol.

"We offered Jung Sunwoo those conditions because you said it would be useful to have him when contracting Son Chaeyoung, but it looks like Son Chaeyoung can't leave W&U easily. CEO Baek, what a scary guy."

“So he didn’t even contact you, huh?”

Choi Gunyoung frowned slightly.

“If he contacted you, I was going to tell people he was thinking of switching companies.”

“But that guy’s quite impressive seeing as he’s unscathed while working with you for almost half a year. No, he’s not just unscathed. I hear that he’s the one in the spotlight, right?”

“Still, I won this time. Though the song is not performing as well as I hoped.”

Choi Gunyoung placed his arms on the table, rested his chin on his hand and smiled.

Seeing his nonchalant smile that revealed his dimples, the man shook his head.

“Since you both brought a title track, the album has double title tracks, right?”

“Yeah. If they appear on entertainment shows a few more times with Simon Lee, then the company should focus on promoting Simon Lee’s song.”

“But, you, what went on between you and Simon Lee?”

“What do you mean what went on between us? I worked hard to persuade him.”

“To you, working hard means by any means possible.”

The man smirked. Choi Gunyoung shrugged.

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“It’s only obvious for someone like you.”

At the man’s words, Choi Gunyoung’s smile thickened.

“Also, in this industry, it’s guys like me who succeed.”

*

It was already the middle of the night when I arrived home after finishing today’s schedule.

Yawning, I took out my phone. I was about to set the alarm a little later because the traitor was going to handle tomorrow’s morning schedule when my phone vibrated.

It was the writer who texted me not too long ago.

-Mr. Manager. Your chief contacted us. We will go forward while thinking your appearance is confirmed. You might be a bit flustered by the concept, but there's no need to be so worried. We won't ask for any more or less, just as much as Star Manager!

Yukhoe – Korean-style raw beef seasoned in various sauces and spices.

Chapter 92: From Now On, We're (1)

The sky at 7 a.m. was gloomy.

Thunder in the clear sky made me lose my sleep since early morning, and now, dark clouds were wriggling together like smoke. These dark clouds covered the red sun in the east, and the entire sky turned grey.

The weather was killer. It just had to be today.

-You said the recording was today, right? Are you prepared?

Hearing my brother's gentle voice, I unknowing started groaning,

"Prepared? They didn't give me a damn thing to prepare for. I think the staff might have gone insane. It's an hour before the recording, yet I still don't know what we're doing. Even if it's a 'reality variety show', this feels like I'm going out to war naked."

Of course, since the staff should have already organized and prepared the show, there shouldn't be any instances where I dig my own grave. Still, I thought they would at least tell us something beforehand. Neptune was new to entertainment shows, and I was a non-celebrity. Yet, they really didn't tell us anything.

-The kids are jumping up and down after hearing that you're appearing on that show. It's the show they watch religiously on

Saturdays. They'll probably have a harder time waiting for the broadcast than going on an outing. (Uncle! Dad, pass me the phone! Me too! I said it first!) You hear them, right?

I could clearly imagine the quadruplets sticking to my brother and aiming for the phone. Even in the morning, they were energetic. Gyeoul, who came out victorious in their intense struggle, shouted in excitement.

-Uncle! Uncle, are you going to be a celebrity? Will you be on TV a lot?

"No."

-Then are you going to appear on a lot of shows? Are you going to appear like before? We're going to invite our friends and watch the show together! Mom said she'll order us fried chicken and pizza! Grandma and grandpa are going to watch it at the town hall...!

Oh, my god.

Like before, I should definitely, definitely avoid embarrassing things like last time.

"Oppa! We're ready to go!"

I heard Im Seoyoung's energetic voice behind me. The girls were looking out the van window after fixing their makeup. I said my farewell to the quadruplets as I got in the driver's seat.

“Uncle has to go work now.”

-Cool! Good luck, uncle! Make sure to win all the games!

“Are you talking to the quadruplets?”

It seemed she heard Gyeoul’s spirited shout as Lee Songha asked as she leaned forward from the back seat. I felt like my eardrum would burst a second later. When I quickly moved my phone away from my ear, the children’s voices echoed in the van.

-Uncle, who was that? Who was it? (Why? What? What’s going on?!) Someone asked, ‘Are you talking to the quadruplets?’ A woman’s voice! (Must be Neptune! How lucky! Me too! Me too! I want to hear her voice too!) Uncle, tell them that we promoted their new songs a ton at school!

They were causing a huge commotion. The girls and their stylists burst into laughter at the back.

I was about to hang up, but Lee Songha stretched her arm out quite enthusiastically.

“Oppa, can I talk to them?”

“Huh? Yeah, here. Be careful of your eardrums.”

When I handed her my phone, everyone gathered around it like pigeons around food and each said a word. I let them be in hopes that it would be a nice change of mood before the recording began. It seemed like their entertainment show anxiety began to flare up after they were edited out a lot on the talk show they appeared on with Simon Lee.

It took almost five minutes for the phone to go around before they finally hung up.

“Do they resemble oppa?”

Lee Songha asked while sticking to the back of the driver’s seat.

“I don’t know. Their personalities definitely aren’t similar to mine, maybe our looks a little? Two of the four are similar to how I looked when I was in elementary school.”

“I’m curious. Oppa’s miniatures.”

Lee Songha mumbled seriously. I was about to reply that we weren’t that alike when I received a text. It stated to enter the parking lot now that they were finished setting up. I started the car and said,

“They are going to film us appearing by opening the car door, and supposedly, the camera is going to tilt up from the legs of the first person getting off the van. Who wants to get off first?”

“Then the one with the best-looking legs needs to get off first!”

“Then everyone besides Im Seoyoung can do rock-paper-scissors.”

“What? Why? Mine are good too!”

In the end, it was decided Lee Songha would get off first.

When we entered the parking lot behind PBS, we saw film director of photography holding a heavy camera, the lighting staff, and cameramen with 6mm cameras slung on their shoulders.

As soon as they finished filming our entrance, a cameraman approached us. The cameraman, wearing a khaki windbreaker, walked backwards as he talked to us.

“We’ll be heading straight to the entertainment department on the sixth floor. The cast members have already arrived and are waiting for the guests.”

Since it was before the morning rush hour, the inside of the broadcasting station was empty. The employees we occasionally saw seemed to have worked overnight as they were busy hiding their hollow faces from the camera whenever they spotted one. Hearing the thunderous rumbles from the windows, it seemed like we were entering a den of zombies than a broadcasting station.

We rode the empty elevator to the sixth floor. Im Seoyoung, who

had been seeing her face reflected on the mirror wall, suddenly tapped my shoulder.

“Oppa, you know…”

“What?”

“Why am I not nervous when I think about appearing with you? I felt like my insides were shrinking before the start of other recordings, but today I feel like ‘Come at me’? Should I say it feels like I arrived with fortune on my back? Right?”

The girls nodded in agreement. Hmm. My shoulders felt heavy for some reason.

We followed the cameraman to a large waiting room. As soon as we entered, the loud noises immediately quieted down. The familiar faces sitting apart from one another stretched their necks as they looked in our direction.

They were veteran celebrities who hosted the 5-year real variety show ‘From Now On, We’re’, which was commonly shortened into ‘Now, We’. When I greeted them with the girls, five men shot up from their seats.

“Oh, Neptune! I know, I know, come in! What are you doing, hurry up and clear the seats of honor!”

“Our guests are a girl group? Ah, man! I told you to tell me ahead

of time if you're going to do things like this!"

"If they told you, then what? You're going to go to a shop before coming? A squid is still a squid."

"Oh, yeah! I went to the shop today. I knew I wanted to go for some reason."

They should have known who the guests were, but their surprised and happy reactions looked incredibly natural. Of course, their reactions were being filmed by the cameras set up around the large meeting room.

While Neptune was dealing with the outpour of questions and interest, I stood like a male ballad singer who came to comfort the troops. Only after the mood died down a little did one of the hosts recognize me.

"You're the manager who appeared on the New Year's Special, right?"

"Yes, I am Jung Sunwoo."

I recalled his profile. Hwang Jaehyun. He was a singer and a familial neighborhood big brother character.

"I'm on a cable broadcast with Taepyeong hyung, and he boasted a ton about how the special had the highest ratings on New Year's. So I watched the broadcast, and it was really fun. Please take care

of us. Our ratings have been dropping these days so we need our guests' help."

"Ah, no, please take care of me. But what are we doing today?"

I asked, thinking that this was the perfect opportunity, but Hwang Jaehyun replied in a nonchalant manner,

"Did you not hear anything?"

"Only the date, time, and place. We weren't told what to prepare for so we only brought ourselves."

"You just need to bring yourselves since we're a show that works people hard."

Well, that was true. Before I came here, I watched previous episodes for research, and on their goal, it stated that they were a broadcast where the members challenged something new every week. However, in the end, the concept would change every week, but they would run around regardless.

"We don't really know much either. I think they need some realistic reaction? If we knew, then it'll become too obvious that we were coordinating with the staff so they don't tell us on purpose."

Realistic reactions, huh? I was becoming more and more clueless.

“So don’t worry. When we start recording, the directing team will follow and direct us. It’s not like they’ll make us do something we can’t, right?”

Hwang Jaehyun said while smiling brightly.

“Right, you’re appearing to promote Neptune’s new songs? If you brought their album, give me one so we can play it when we’re in the car.”

Of course, I brought it. A boxful of them.

I told him I would give him one later and glanced at the girls. Even though they are surrounded by ‘Now, We’ members, the mood felt comfortable, not awkward at all. Im Seoyoung chatted as she continued this cheerful mood.

Then a woman who seemed to be a member of the directing team entered.

“Bringing in the next guests!”

So there were other guests. As soon as I thought this, my surroundings became noisy.

“What? There are more guests today? Is it another girl group?”

“They are actors this time. Two of them.”

“If there’s an actress, I’m not leaving work today! Let’s record for two days straight without sleep!”

“I agree! I return my ‘right to leave work’!”

Their reactions were more realistic than mine.

Soon, the door opened, and the two aforementioned actors entered.

As expected of actors.

Her cheeks were plump and warm like freshly made rice cakes. Her eyes were so large that they seemed to be pasted on, and she had rose-colored lips. She was a child actress walking hurriedly with her short arms and legs.

A mixed-raced boy was paired the girl, but they were even younger than the quadruplets. Still, they seemed to have quite a bit of experience since they were children I had often seen in miniseries, daily dramas, and even movies.

“Oppa, I suddenly got a feeling.”

Im Seoyoung whispered to me.

“Maybe they cast oppa to take care of those two child actresses?”

I was a bit suspicious too since I became known as the ‘uncle of quadruplets’ because of Star Manager.

However, unlike the quadruplets, who still looked very childish, they gave off a completely different feeling. How should I say it? They didn’t seem so young as to need someone to look after them.

The girl smiled brightly as she acted cute in front of the uncles, but it was clear she was acting like that to doted on. The mixed-raced boy had the expression of a grandpa who seemed tired of everything.

The two child actors went around greeting everyone, and when they got to me, they tilted their fist-sized heads. It looked like they were confused as to whether I was a guest or not. I was about to speak first when-

“Since everyone’s here, including the guests, we’ll start the actual recording now.”

The woman who introduced the guests a while ago shouted while clapping her hands. When the conversations died down and their gazes focused on her, the woman took out a cue card.

“You must be curious why you’ve gathered here in the morning, but we’ll start individual interviews in another room first. You just have to enter the room to the side in the order your name is

called!”

“What? What is it? You’re not going to give us some weird mission again, right?”

“Stop making us do weird things after inviting guests!”

The woman didn’t even bat an eye as she called Hwang Jaehyun’s name first. He disappeared with a leery expression. Soon, two more left the large meeting room. It seemed they would go somewhere else after their individual interviews as no one returned.

“Mr. Jung Sunwoo!”

I got up as soon as my name was called. Since I was the first in our group, the Neptune girls waved their hands as though they were seeing off someone going on a long journey.

“Oppa! Live so we can meet again!”

“If something happens in the room, scream.”

“Am I Shim Chung being dragged to the Indangsu Sea?”

I grinned as I followed the woman.

The room I was guided to had an unusual atmosphere for some reason. The window was blocked by blackout curtains, and the lights were a chilling purple color. The mood felt like someone should release some dry ice as well.

Inside were two cameras, a producer, and a writer.

The producer was a face I became familiar with after watching previous episodes, Bae Junghwan, the main producer. The short-haired woman giving off an urban feel was the second writer, Song Yujin, who had texted me previously.

When I sat at a table covered with a black cloth, Writer Song smiled as she said,

“You give off a stronger impression in real life than on screen.”

When I greeted them with a sour face, Writer Song continued speaking.

“We’ve been hearing that our program has fallen into a routine a lot these days, so we’ve been using guests to add fresh blood to the program. Writer Park, who planned Star Manager, suggested Mr. Sunwoo and Neptune.”

“Ah, that person.”

“I said that we wanted to bring out as much as that program, but we’re not really expecting that much, so there’s no need to be

worried. If you can make things that fun every time, then you need to be on broadcasts than being a manager. You just need to act naturally with the Neptune members.”

“Yes, but… What do I have to do naturally?”

Seeing as they were calling us individually, it seemed like they were giving missions like someone mentioned, and I also thought that it could be a hidden camera prank.

Still, I hoped that, since I was already appearing, it would be something I was good at. Then I could obtain some air time and, like my original goal, promote Neptune’s new songs.

“Then I’ll tell you a secret first.”

Producer Bae said while making a serious expression.

“To be honest, there are people who possess special powers in the world.”

“… Special powers?”

“They’re called superpowers.”

I almost made a bizarre expression in front of the cameras.

Producer Bae unveiled the black cloth covering the table to reveal a few cards with large words printed on them.

“Now, pick one.”

Producer Bae said while gesturing to the cards.

There were a few cards, but only one caught my eye.

The card with the words ‘Future Prophet’.

Gyeoul – Winter in Korean. So the quadruplets’ names are Bom (Spring), Yeoleum (Summer), Kaeul (Fall), and Gyeoul (Winter). (Not that you didn’t guess that)

He’s saying he’s ugly no matter how much he tries.

Park Taepyeong – One of the MCs on Star Manager.

A folktale where Shim Chung trades herself for 300 sacks of rice to restore her father’s sight.

Chapter 93: From Now On, We're (2)

I did hope that it was something I would be good at.

However, this wasn't right.

In front of someone who could actually see the future, though no one knew that besides me, either way, I felt taken aback after seeing the 'Future Prophet' card just lying in front of me.

The moment I slightly touched the card, almost in a trance, Producer Bae Junghwan nodded.

"Good."

"Pardon?"

"Mr. Sunwoo will see the future today."

How fantastic.

Leaving the room, I went down to the parking lot accompanied by a cameraman. Amidst the staff, who were bustling to prepare for the outdoor shoot, there were two vans of the same design but different colors.

When I opened the driver's seat door out of habit, the two people who were already inside turned their gazes towards me.

One was Hwang Jaehyun, who I had talked to before. The other was the youngest character on ‘Now, We’, Im Joowon, an actor.

As soon as I greeted them, Hwang Jaehyun dropped his formal speech and asked,

“You picked a card too, right? What kind of power is it?”

“Ah, I can see the future.”

Jung Sunwoo. 28 years old. Future Prophet.

What should I say? It seemed like words had power. Once my biggest secret, which I had kept hidden for almost half a year and would continue to do so from now on, left my lips, I felt refreshed all the way from my belly.

Hwang Jaehyun and Im Joowon each had their own power. While I was listening to their explanations, other people soon arrived as well. The child actress Song Yuri, Lee Taehee, and Lee Songha, who sat next to me.

“Songha, what did you pick?”

“Hypnotist.”

Lee Songha replied with a proud expression.

“I can hypnotize one person and make him mine.”

“Yours?”

“Yes, I just need to hypnotize that person and write my name on his forehead. I think I chose well.”

Seeing as she stared at my forehead after saying that, I had a feeling.

“You aren’t trying to use it on me, right?”

Lee Songha avoided my gaze and focused on something else. So she was going to.

“Why use that on me? What use will I be after you hypnotize me?”

“Hmm. This or that.”

So what were they!

When I told her to aim for someone else besides me, she looked at me with an expression that asked, ‘Why?’ While telling her that she would get more screen time and it would be more fun if she used it on a cast member, I heard Hwang Jaehyun’s voice from behind.

“Hey, relax.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

Now that I thought about it, Im Joohwan’s reactions were a bit weird. I could tell that his pretty face, which ignited women’s maternal instincts, was a bit stiff. He was also glancing at me and Lee Songha since a while ago.

Hwang Jaehyun waved his hand as he said,

“He’s just jealous. The lead male role for Cat Guardian Ghost was offered to him first. Mr. Seo Jijoon’s role. If he had done it, he would have been a big hit right about now. Since he kicked that away, how upset must he be?”

“Ah, really, hyung!”

Thinking about it now, there were articles regarding Im Joohwan before Seo Jijoon. Something about him being injured?

When I glanced at him, Im Joohwan was making an irritated face.

“I could have made it for the drama since it was a minor injury, but my company told me not to do it. Saying that it wouldn’t do well and that I should just use my injury as an excuse to refuse.

The hell they mean by it wouldn't do well? Damn company! They're no use. After my contract ends, I'm going to leave it without turning back."

"I'm slowly starting to look for a company too, sunbaenim."

Song Yuri, who was sitting in the middle, joined in while blinking cutely.

"Until now, my uncle managed my schedule, but it's a bit frustrating. If I want to transform into an adult actress later on, I felt that I would need a company."

The two went back and forth discussing a few management companies. They were all management companies that were famous in this industry.

Well, if it were those two, then almost all companies would welcome them. Im Joohwan was a star actor who could play lead roles on public networks, and Song Yuri was a child actress with outstanding potential, having received the Best New Actress Award at a film festival, which was unprecedented for a child actress.

My company would welcome them as well. The PR Team seemed to be constantly looking actors entering the free contract market. Should I try my hand?

"How about W&U?"

The two stopped talking once they heard my words.

Im Joohwan and Song Yuri stared at me. Just as my cheeks were heating up, Im Joohwan asked with a strange expression,

“Are you scouting us right now?”

I was about to reply while smiling when Producer Bae stuck his head in through the van window.

“Superhumans, are you ready to move?”

“What? Is this all? Where are the others?”

At Hwang Jaehyun’s question, the producer gestured towards the white van standing a bit away from us. Writer Song was there, explaining something to them, and I caught a glimpse of LJ and Im Seoyoung through the door opening.

Producer Bae spoke,

“Today, we divided you into two teams: the Superhuman team and the Researcher team. The Superhuman team has to be careful not to get caught by the Researcher team. Since superhumans are valuable test subjects, you will be dragged to their research lab if you are caught.”

Valuable what?

“Isn’t that too cruel? What have the superhumans done?”

I asked sincerely. I already had a nightmare where a mad scientist found out about my foresight ability and kidnapped me. I woke up after being bound up tightly and laid down on a surgical table.

With a brazen face, the producer stared at me as if asking what was wrong.

“This is the way of the world.”

“For a rated G entertainment show to take on such a world view devoid of hopes and dreams…”

“Well, the world has always been like this. Even kids know that.”

It was okay for kids to watch this program, right?

“Then before we head out, Mr. Sunwoo, please see the future.”

“How do I see it?”

“With this.”

The producer handed me a box the size of my head. Inside were a

few different colored dice, and there were stickers on each of the six faces. The people at the back chatted noisily as they leaned their heads forward.

“You just need to throw the dice all at once.”

“Isn’t there some sort of chant when using your superpower?”

I almost swore at Hwang Jaehyun in front of the cameras.

When I imagined myself chanting, ‘Come out, future!’ while holding the dice, shivers ran down my entire body. No way. There was no way, right? If I had to do something like that, then I might really see a future where I die. This time, my cause of death would be out of humiliation for sure.

The producer glanced at me.

“If you want a chant, ‘Moon Prism Power, With Light-“

“No, I’ll just throw them. I’ll throw them right now.”

Without breathing, I threw the dice all at once. I heard someone sigh in regret beside me. When I turned to look at her, Lee Songha acted otherwise.

Hitting the walls of the box, the rolling dice stopped one after another.

“Now take off the sticker on top and see the event that will happen in the future.”

Following Producer Bae’s request, I began tearing off the stickers, starting with the red die.

“The Superhuman team will, in one hour, on the streets of Sinchon, with civilians, complete a mission.”

Haha, so this was what future foresight was. If the futures I had seen were even half as clear as this, I might have already become a chief. Licking my lips, I returned the dice.

Then we drove to Sinchon as the future indicated.

Of course, we played Neptune’s new songs loudly in the van.

“There are a lot of people because it’s the weekend. Everyone, be careful while on your mission so that there aren’t any accidents.”

Producer Bae asked us as soon as we came out of the van.

There were clearly a lot of people. Since it was the weekend, they had even restricted traffic. From the sidewalks to even the asphalt road, the entire Yonsei Street was crowded with people. Wherever I looked, I saw couples, and there were a lot of families with strollers.

“Uhhh! It’s Im Joowon!”

“Isn’t that the ‘Now, We’ team over there? Right? Hey, hurry up! They are filming something here!”

“It looks like Song Yuri’s a guest! Who’s that next to her?”

“Isn’t that Neptune? Oh, my god. Seeing their appearance in person… Amazing! Let’s go closer!”

People began to gather around us as soon as we entered the streets. Because of the filming staff, they weren’t able to come too close. All the women looked at Im Joowon and the men watched Lee Songha and Lee Taehee as their excitement heightened.

“I feel like we’re going to be squashed. The weather’s gloomy, yet they still came out on dates.”

“Still, it’ll be difficult for the Researcher team to find us because of all the people, right?”

Hwang Jaehyun shrugged at Im Joowon’s complaint. Then he asked Lee Taehee,

“We’re probably going to have to run today. How are Neptune’s athletic abilities?”

“In our group, LJ is the best since she boxes as a hobby. Seoyoung practiced dancing since she was young so she’s good too. Songha, if you provide her with sufficient fuel, ah, if you give her food, she can move well.”

“And you?”

“I’m awful.”

Lee Taehee replied without hesitation.

“Awful? How are you at running?”

“I’ve never run since the physical fitness test during high school…”

Looking off into the distance, Lee Taehee took something out from her pocket and ate it. It was a ginseng jelly, a healthy food she received from a fan. Seeing her like this, Hwang Jaehyun clicked his tongue with an expression that read, ‘There’s no hope for her.’

“Producer, quickly give us the mission! So that we can complete it quickly and flee before the Researcher team gets here!”

At Im Joowon’s urgings, the producer handed out mission cards. On my card, it said to bring a same-aged couple.

“Taehee, what does yours say?”

“Buy two fresh fruit juices.”

Lee Taehee replied while looking around her.

“And Songha?”

“Mine says to bring a baby boy on a stroller.”

Fortunately, theirs weren’t too picky. Mine was the pickiest. While there were countless couples, I had to ask each of them to see if they were the same age.

I separated from the girls and went into the crowd of people. The cameraman assigned to me chased after me. I asked smiling couples for their understanding and age.

However, it felt weird standing amidst people who came to leisurely enjoy their weekend.

Should I say that I felt like I became distanced from this normal scene after living busily in the entertainment industry all this time? A sudden sense of reality overcame me.

On my next break, I must meet a friend or someone.

Resolving myself, I was about to ask my fourth couple.

“Hey, aren’t you Jung Sunwoo? Right? Jung Sunwoo?”

When I turned around, a familiar couple was looking at me. The one who clearly called my name was the man. I definitely remembered his face, but was he my university colleague? Or from high school? I couldn’t remember his name.

When I smacked my lips, the man’s complexion crumbled.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember me?”

“Yeah, sorry. I have trouble recognizing faces.”

“Kim Taejong, man! Kim Taejong! But what are you doing these days? Did you come here alone?”

The guy, who just told me his name on his own, looked up and down at me while questioning me. Seeing as he was pulling his girlfriend’s shoulder in, it seemed he wanted to ask if I was single on this spring weekend.

A stronger sense of reality overwhelmed me like a tsunami.

“You used look after kids all the time instead of coming to the PC room. Like some boy breadwinner with a bunch of younger siblings. Do you still look after them?”

“Well, something like that.”

I was taking care of some girls.

“Enjoy your life a little. We’ll be thirty soon!”

When Kim Taejong said this, his girlfriend tilted her head.

“Taejong, did I see your friend before? He seems familiar?”

“Hey, how would you have seen him if this is my first time seeing him in a long time?”

Rather than their conversation, I heard their casual speech.

They were the same age! I quickly smiled friendlily at Kim Taejong and said,

“Are you the same age as your girlfriend?”

“Yeah, why...? Hey, doesn’t it seem like that cameraman is filming us?”

Kim Taejong suddenly tidied his hair as he looked behind me. The cameraman was still filming me from a little distance away. I was about to explain in detail to Kim Taejong and ask for his cooperation.

“Oppa.”

Lee Songha approached me from my right.

With a slightly smiling face and while carefully pushing a stroller. Behind her lush hair that fluttered in the wind were men who followed behind her like zombies, completely entranced.

“What are you doing here? I’m done.”

“Uh, I think I’m almost done too. I met someone I knew-“

“Did you get married?”

Kim Taejong suddenly said something ridiculous. He foolishly looked at Lee Songha and the stroller before looking back at me.

“D-did you marry? Did you marry th... that person? Is that your kid?”

“Are you trying to prevent someone’s chances of getting married? That’s not it.”

“Right? Of course, no wonder. The kid didn’t resemble you. I was shocked.”

Behind Lee Songha, a young couple, who looked to be the baby's parents, laughed while covering their mouths. I was about to explain the situation to Kim Taejong once again, but this time, I heard a commotion from my left.

"Oppa, I bought fresh fruit juice."

Lee Taehee came out through the crowd holding a green juice glass in each hand.

Maybe it was because of crowd of people, but she approached me with unusually swift steps. She looked at Kim Taejong and tilted her head. Kim Taejong opened and closed his mouth before asking me,

"Hey, don't tell me, she's-"

"No. Whatever you're thinking of, no."

"Ah! Neptune!"

Kim Taejong's girlfriend shouted out of the blue. Then she pointed at them.

"You're Neptune, right? And, you're their manager, right? The one who appeared on the New Year's Special!"

"That's right. We are currently filming 'From Now On, We're'. If

you have the time, would you mind doing a mission with us?”

“Of course, it’s fine! Oh, my! What do I do?! I’m totally fine! We can just cancel the movie!”

“What? What’s Neptune?”

While I was explaining the situation to the two people in detail, there was a commotion behind me this time. Wondering who it was this time, I turned around and flinched.

I saw familiar faces. LJ and Im Seoyoung were running straight at us.

“Oppa! Stay there! Don’t run away!”

I understood the situation as soon as I heard Im Seoyoung shouting forebodingly.

“Uh, hey, we should run.”

“What?!”

I asked Kim Taejong and his girlfriend to wait a little, and we quickly scattered to avoid LJ and Im Seoyoung. I was wondering how we would complete our mission now that we had been seen.

Then, in front of me, an ear-piercing scream erupted amidst the crowd of people.

Then a second and third time. The screams quickly spread. At first, I thought Im Joowon was doing something. Or that the ‘Now, We’ team had gathered and were inciting cheers. I couldn’t think of anything else that could bring about such an intense reaction besides those two.

However, something was off. These weren’t happy screams from seeing celebrities. They seemed as though they were stricken with fear. ‘Avoid it!’ ‘Run!’ Screams like these that didn’t suit this place were mixed in as well.

“I think something’s happening over there? Uhh, why are those people acting like that?”

“What the heck! Someone’s going to get hurt!”

People around me murmured.

The screaming people ran in our direction as if running away from something. I figured out the reason a few seconds later. An old truck loaded with water bottles was rushing towards us. Through a street packed with people.

… Just what was that person doing? Was he insane?

A fleeing woman was hit by the truck. Screams erupted all

around.

As if swaying, the truck turned and rushed side to side. People scattered like a swarm of minnows hit by a rock. An abnormal event was occurring in this place, which had been extremely normal only moments ago.

Wait, where were the girls?

I hastily looked around within the confusion. LJ and Im Seoyoung were far away, and Lee Taehee was a bit away as well. Lee Songha had abandoned the stroller and was hugging the baby.

She was in the direction the truck was charging at.

Without having the mind to comprehend the situation, I shot forward. Lee Songha, who was running away while hugging the baby, seemed to trip on something as she fell over. When she got back up, the truck was right in front of her.

“Songha!”

Lee Songha looked in my direction. An unknown expression brushed across her shocked face. I ran forward and embraced Lee Songha and the baby. I heard the sound of tires scratching the asphalt.

It was going to hit us.

Just as I thought this, Lee Taehee suddenly pushed my back forcefully.

I'd usually find an English equivalent, but in this case, since both Song Yuri and Im Joohwan are young, it felt odd calling Im Joohwan 'senior'. Sunbae – senior in the same industry, work, organization, etc. Side note: Song Yuri uses a much more formal version – sunbaenim.

PC Room/Bang – Places where you can pay to use the computer, mainly for games. This has been mentioned before.

Casual speech is usually used by people of the same age. Even if they are close, you can tell who's older by how they speak to one another. Ex. A woman may use 'oppa' when referring to her boyfriend who's older than her.

Specifically referring to Lee Songha.

Chapter 94: From Now On, We're (3)

"Taehee!"

I hastily shouted.

The instant my body wobbled, I fell to the ground.

"... You will see the future-... Mr. Sunwoo?"

My thigh hit the cold floor, and my ankle groaned in pain under the chair that had fallen down with me. There wasn't any other pain besides that. I quickly took in a deep breath like someone who had been submerged in water. Then I looked around at my surroundings.

This wasn't the streets of Sinchon.

It wasn't the street where screams erupted out and people scattered chaotically. I was in the room with purple lights, the room that I had entered an hour ago to pick my superpower.

What the heck? Just what happened?

Taken aback, I had been calming myself by taking deep breaths when Producer Bae hesitantly stood up.

"Uh, were you just acting just now?"

Writer Song Yujin added in with widened eyes.

“Producer, while it isn’t the future foresight ability we had set up, let’s try to save this since it’s a shame to waste it. It’s realistic. I almost thought that today’s concept was a thriller.”

“It was good, right? Then…”

Producer Bae placed the fallen chair upright as he asked,

“Mr. Sunwoo, did you see the future just now? What kind of future was it?”

What kind of future was it?

The woman who rolled on the ground after being hit by the truck was still vivid in my mind. Screams echoed in my ears, and I gasped when I saw the truck about to hit Lee Songha and the baby. Then that truck…

What happened after?

No, more importantly… Everything wasn’t real?

I got on the elevator with the cameraman. It opened on the first floor. When we went out to the rear parking lot, I saw the staff chatting and two vans for the members. They were all things I had

seen before.

I looked down. My feet were on the concrete floor of the parking lot. So I was walking on the ground properly. It had felt like the floor was rolling.

I got on the driver's seat of the black van.

After a familiar greeting, Hwang Jaehyun asked,

"You picked a card too, right? What kind of power is it?"

"... Future prophet. Do you... have the power to stop time?"

"What the heck? How did you know?"

Since I heard it previously.

"Ah, does the future prophet know other people's powers too?"

"Guess so. But what's wrong with your complexion? Relax. It's too exaggerated."

"Producer Bae probably asked for something weird again."

The voices of the two talking and laughing seemed so distant.

I exhaled the breath I had been holding back and wracked my brain, which was currently like a rusty machine.

First, things were following what happened in my memory. What I saw, which I wasn't certain if describing it that way was correct, seemed like it would be the future that would unfold soon.

However, it was in a completely different format than before.

There was no static or myself 20 years in the future, and I could move on my own. However, it was so realistic that I couldn't even consider it as the future.

Even now, rather than feeling like I had seen the future, I felt like I had returned to the past.

Why? Why was it different from before?

I looked for a clue within my foggy mind when, suddenly, I recalled the last scene. Lee Taehee pushed my back, but the power in her thin arms was insignificant. Most likely, we were all hit by the truck the next moment.

I was probably hit too. I might have even been in a critical state.

Maybe it was because of that? Was the method in which I saw the future different from the others until now because I would be in a

large accident incomparable to the others? While it was only a guess, that was all I could think of for now.

Just then, Lee Taehee got in the car. The moment I recalled her pushing my back, my mind jolted awake as if cold water had been poured on me.

“Hey, just why did you-!”

I unknowingly shouted before stopping. I almost made a mistake. The others were looking at me with wide eyes.

Lee Taehee tilted her head.

“Did I do something?”

“Your manager is the future prophet. It seems he’s been seeing things since a while ago. It has even gone beyond the realm of role-playing. Look at how realistic his expression is. Joowon. What are you doing? Stop losing to the guest and reflect on yourself!”

“Worry about yourself. I’m trying to get into character.”

While Hwang Jaehyun and Im Joowon were chatting, Lee Taehee leaned towards the driver’s seat.

“Does something happen to me in the future?”

“Yeah… I think something will happen today. So be careful.”

“Okay.”

Her light brown eyes curled into a smile.

Next, the child actress Song Yuri and Lee Songha got in one after another. Lee Songha said she picked ‘Hypnotist’ as she glanced at my forehead while holding a black marker, and Im Joowon and Song Yuri discussed changing companies. Then Producer Bae passed me a box of dice.

With the box in hand, I thought for a moment.

Perhaps the results would be different this time.

However, this thought disappeared the moment I took off the sticker of the red die.

“The Superhuman team will…”

‘In one hour, on the streets of Sinchon, with civilians, complete a mission.’

Gulping dryly, I looked at Lee Taehee and Lee Songha. The two probably couldn’t imagine what would happen to them in an hour.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened.

There were many moments when I thought that I changed the present after seeing the future until now. However, I was more desperate than ever before.

Should I act crazy and say I couldn't go? Or tell them I had certain circumstances? Faint after saying I wasn't feeling well? Or just drive in a completely different direction? If I did, then we probably wouldn't be involved in that incident.

With a complicated mind, I recalled the chaotic scene.

Producer Bae knocked on the window, telling me to start driving. I bit my lips and started the van. I needed time to think. I had to think of something on our way.

What method would be the best to change the future?

The scene in my memory played out in front of me.

I saw couples laughing and chatting while enjoying the event and families with strollers. The streets of Sinchon were extremely peaceful and normal, just like before the incident.

Since the truck would rush in here soon, I would have liked it if everything could be handled by shouting to everyone, telling them to run away, but there were cameras. I shook my head after calculating the storm that would sweep through my life

afterwards.

Before Producer Bae distributed the missions, I told him,

“Producer, I’m going to go to the washroom. That U-Plex building.”

“Okay. But it’ll be good if you hurry since the Researcher team has found your location and are on their way here.”

I told Lee Songha and Lee Taehee to stay with the staff and walked away, almost running. Of course, I wasn’t planning on coming back before the incident took place.

I was relieved since this place was quite a distance away from the location of the incident, and if the five celebrities stayed together without dispersing, civilians would gather here as well.

“Apparently, the ‘Now, We’ team is over there! Let’s go there, quickly!”

“Oh, my god, what in the world! Autographs, where can we go get autographs?”

I passed the rushing people and approached a gigantic building. Fortunately, I didn’t need to lie to lose my cameraman. He raised his camera and stopped.

“I’ll be filming the crowds in front of the building so come here when you’re done.”

“Yes, then I’ll be back soon.”

While he was filming, I entered the building and left through a different exit. Then I took off the mic on my shirt and called 112.

“I want to report a drunken driver. It was a water bottle truck and the driver seemed very drunk. There are a lot of people on the streets right now because of an event and someone might get hurt.”

I constantly thought about it on my way here.

Why did the truck charge into a vehicle-prohibited area?

I came up with three hypotheses.

The truck was broken and couldn’t stop. Though, if this was the case, then the question was why the driver drove into a crowd of people instead of turning towards the trees on the side of the street or something.

My second hypothesis was that the driver was drunk and wasn’t in his right mind. If not, then he might be a crazy person with a lot of dissatisfaction towards the world trying to commit an unspeakable crime.

Which was why I reported him as a drunk driver. Other reasons were that it looked like drunk driving, and it was the most likely and easiest to make up and manage.

Soon, I was told that it had been reported to the police. They said they would dispatch officers right away.

I stood in the middle of the street and recalled the place of the incident.

That time, I was in the middle of Yonsei Street, and the commotion was in the front, not too far away. There was quite a distance between me and the traffic circle. If the water bottle truck had charged through the traffic circle, then the commotion would have gone on for much longer.

Then there was a bigger chance that it came out from an alley in between.

When I arrived, there was a pathway for cars to pass between the left and right alleys like a crosswalk for cars. While there were traffic cones and poles set up so that cars wouldn't drive out of the pathway, when I touched them, they were made of plastic, empty inside, and had no strength. At least there was a rectangular bar that seemed quite heavy, seemingly filled with sand, but it felt like cars could still charge through it.

I clicked my tongue out of nervousness when I got a call from the producer.

-Mr. Sunwoo, where are you? The cameraman says he can't find you?

I thought about it for a second before saying,

"Producer, I saw a drunken driver up the street. The driver seemed to be in a really bad condition."

-Pardon? What did you say?

"Worried that there might be a big accident, I am looking around for the car. Err, just in case, could you gather the civilians' attention? Maybe encourage a cheer?"

-Err.... Mr. Sunwoo, are you serious right now? It's not a part of your concept?

He sounded flustered. I would be the same if I was in his position.

After I told him that I had reported it to the police, dazed, Producer Bae said he understood. Not long after, I heard cheers behind me.

While waiting for the police, I checked to see if there was a water bottle truck in either of the two alleys. The alleys were complex like a maze. While I did see a few cars, none were the one from my memory.

During this time, people laughed and chatted as they passed me. I informed the civilians. At first, when I told them about the drunk driver, their expressions asked, ‘So what?’, but when I told them about celebrities, they were instantly enthralled.

Well, who could imagine an incident that they had only ever seen on the news where a car charged down the street into people? Even I, who personally saw it, wondered if it was real in that moment.

Time kept passing. My chest felt stiff from nervousness.

“Mr. Sunwoo! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. What was that about?”

The cameraman ran towards me while carrying his camera.

The moment I looked back at him, accompanied by the rough sound of an engine, a truck came out from the alley on the other side and crashed into the traffic cones. It was an old truck with water bottles loaded on its trunk. It was the truck I had seen.

The people around me scattered while screaming. Like an agitated bull, the truck crashed into the traffic cones and the delineator posts. The powerless traffic cones flew out in various directions, and I saw those hit by them fall before hastily getting back up and fleeing.

“Wha-what the heck? What’s wrong with that truck?”

“Fuck, that scared me! Is there a problem with the car? Why’s it going nuts?”

“Is that driver crazy? Hey, hey, reported him to the police!”

I still didn’t see the police and the water bottle truck was going nuts, going around in circles, before stopping momentarily after crashing into the traffic cones and the heavy rectangular bar. Relief crossed people’s expressions.

However, the real commotion hadn’t begun.

Damn. I swore while rushing in at full speed.

I didn’t know what I was doing. I had never rushed into or even thought about rushing into a situation like this.

But, when I thought about how the car would charge towards people once it started moving again, strength went into my legs as I recalled the last moment I had seen.

I instantly approached the side of the truck. When I grabbed the door handle and pulled it open, I was overwhelmed with a thick stench of alcohol. A middle-aged man turned to look at me with his hands on the steering wheel. Looking at his eyes, he didn’t seem to be in his right mind.

Without the time to think about it, I grabbed the middle-aged man and dragged him out of the driver's seat.

"... So we're going to stop the recording for a bit. The recording isn't the problem right now, no, it is. The recording is a problem, but I'm just too flustered right now. I'm telling you that a big accident could have happened here! It's crazy, police cars and-!"

When I turned back after finishing my conversation with the officers, who arrived a little late, Producer Bae Junghwan was talking gibberish into his phone. The other staff members and cast members were looking at me with expressions of 'Just what happened?'

The Neptune girls were anxious and rushed towards me as soon as they saw me. Their already light faces were as white as paper.

"O-oppa, oppa, are you okay? We felt like our hearts were about to drop!"

"Just what is going on... Are-are you hurt anywhere?"

"Stop standing there stupidly and turn around so that we can see if you're alright!"

Im Seoyoung, Lee Taehee, and LJ gathered around me and examined my condition. Lee Songha was a few steps away from me, standing rigidly and unblinking, as she stared at me as though she was stricken with fear.

To be honest, I was partly out of it, but because the girls' reactions were so intense, my mind crawled back to its senses. After showing them that I was alright and comforting them, the mood relaxed a little.

Hwang Jaehyun and the other celebrities came up to me after the girls.

"I heard you blocked a drunken driver charging into the streets with your body. Is that true?"

"I heard you stopped a truck and fought with the driver. Is that true?"

"... No. If I had that sort of talent, I would have become a national athlete."

I said while exhaling the breath I had been holding in. Mingling in their noisy conversation, I finally felt like the incident was over. Only after I relaxed my shoulders did I realize how tense I was.

Producer Bae hung up his phone and was about to approach me.

"Excuse me, producer. They are from the organization hosting the culture market or something event today. They apparently have something to say to you..."

The floor director brought over the people from the event and an employee from the district office. The man who had thanked me multiple times a few moments ago lowered his head to Producer Bae and requested,

"The mood is a bit uneasy because people are shocked by the incident just now. If it's not too much trouble, could the celebrities tell them that it's fine and to relax?"

"Us?"

At Hwang Jaehyun's question, the event organizer looked at the celebrities and me and continued,

"Since the person who personally resolved the incident is here and because you are all famous, if you all say something, then I think the mood will quickly calm down. Would you consider it?"

"Well, saying something isn't difficult..."

"If the mood calms, then I think we'll be able to get the mood to naturally settle down since an indie band is going to arrive soon and begin their performance."

An indie band. A performance. As soon as I heard this, I suddenly thought of something.

The reason why I decided to appear on this entertainment show, which I had completely forgotten due to the incident.

I looked at the surrounding cameras, civilians, and the girls, who were calming their surprised hearts. Then I approached the event organizer and Producer Bae, who were talking with each other, and said,

"If we're going to do it, how about Neptune performs a song as well?"

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The staff were moving busily. Producer Bae glanced at the camera and lighting equipment being set up in front of the small stage as he ended his call. Then he gestured to Jung Sunwoo and his cameraman, who were nearby.

"We need to check the tape. If you filmed the scene, they want us to send it to the newsroom."

When she heard this, Writer Song Yujin's eyes widened.

"The newsroom? It'll be on the news?"

"Since there aren't any severely injured people or anything, we don't know if it'll be as newsworthy, but if we have the scene, then it's an exclusive for us. They'll check the recording and determine if it's worth showing in a news brief."

Producer Bae said with a still dazed expression.

“The news is the news, but how are we supposed to edit this…”

Stopping in thought, he pointed to the cameraman and asked,

“You followed Mr. Sunwoo in the end, right? Mr. Sunwoo rushing into the scene, how much of it did you get?”

The cameraman handed him his 6mm camera and replied,

“All of it.”

Korea’s emergency telephone number.

Chapter 95: From Now On, We're (4)

I looked around at my noisy surroundings.

I recalled the horrifying accident that I had seen. The scene that would only remain in my memory was completely different from the scene in front of me right now. The commotion died down, and the scale of the accident had been glossed over as 'an unpleasant instance'.

The police took the drunk man who wasn't in his right mind away. The injured were treated at pharmacies or sent to the university hospital nearby. Since the majority of the injured people had been hit by the traffic cones or fallen over while fleeing, there was no need to call an ambulance.

While the mood was a bit uneasy, this changed soon as well.

"Ah damn, I was really freaking out. What kind of instance is this after going out in public?"

"Still, the 'Now, We' members are going to talk on stage because of it! I could only see them from afar because it was too crowded. Quick! Let's get seats at the front!"

As soon as the news that the 'Now, We' team and their guests, including Neptune, were going on stage, people began gathering around the small stage. The jib camera that had been set up was moving in the air as it filmed this sight.

I gave the USB drive containing the instrumentals to the audio staff and went to find Neptune when Producer Bae Junghwan approached me with quick steps. After fixing his hat twice, he said,

"Mr. Sunwoo, about the current situation. Since the news is already spreading through social media, I think it'll be quite the hot topic if we issue a promotional press release. Is it okay for my team to freeload off of it?"

"Pardon?"

When I tilted my head, Producer Bae scratched his head and added,

"I was thinking about how it would be if we packaged the scenes where we gathered the people's attention, who were originally at the scene of the incident, and where we go up on the stage to calm the mood. Like a moving tale during a recording. Though it is a bit too dynamic to call it a moving tale."

"I think it'll be fine. If there's a problem with the press release on my side, then the PR team-"

"No, we gathered the people's attention by your request. I was wondering if it was okay for us to freeload off this when you settled the problem on your own..."

"I'm completely okay with it."

Rather, I had a ton to thank Producer Bae and the staff since they listened to my absurd words and readily agreed to my request asking if Neptune could perform a song.

This incident would have been a bolt out of the blue for the filming team as well.

“I am sorry that the recording has been delayed. You’re even letting Neptune perform.”

“People’s safety takes priority over delays. Since our members are going to go up and greet people on the stage as well, we were going to get some airtime from that anyways. You’re obviously going to go up as well, right?”

“Yes, well, if I have to.”

“Ah, right. Also-”

I was nodding when Producer Bae said something completely unexpected.

“About the incident. I think it might be on the news later, is that okay? The newsroom asked me to ask for your understanding.”

“The news?”

That would go on the news? Not on internet articles or the entertainment show, but the news?

It seemed my flustered expression was clearly revealed as Producer Bae stressed that it would quickly pass since it would be in a news brief and that I shouldn't be too troubled by it.

I rigidly nodded my head. If it would quickly pass, then... there probably wouldn't be a problem. It wasn't like there were only one or two incidents on the news. Even cases where someone rescued a person who had fallen down onto the subway tracks or had captured a heinous criminal with his bare hands would quickly die down so this shouldn't matter much.

Just then, my phone in my pocket rang. It was Team Leader Park.

I answered the phone while separating from Producer Bae.

"Yes, team leader."

-I know that you are in the middle of recording, but there are weird posts popping up on social media. I've even been receiving an outpour of calls from reporters. So I felt like I had to ask you personally, are you in Sinchon?

"... Yes. I'm in Sinchon. What kind of posts did you see?"

-'Now, We' team and Neptune are filming in Sinchon, but a

drunk driver suddenly charged down a street filled with people. Everyone was at a loss due to the shock, but Neptune's manager, which I think they are talking about you, dragged the driver out and ended the incident?

Her voice was filled with disbelief.

-Also, I heard that 'the 'Now, We' team is going on stage to greet people because of the uneasy mood' and that 'people nearby should go and watch since Neptune is going to perform as well.' How much of this is the truth and how much is made up?

"Hmm. I think it's all true. From the beginning to the end."

As if she didn't know what to say, Team Leader was silent for a moment before asked in a bewildered voice.

-... Just what did you do during the entertainment show recording?

"I don't know. Something newsworthy?"

Even as those words came out of my mouth, they felt surreal. I also suddenly thought that I should tell my parents and my brother ahead of time. While I didn't know if I would be in the news or not, there would be a huge fuss at home if they saw it without knowing.

-My word, are you hurt?

“I’m fine.”

-Okay. Either way, you’re saying it’s all true? While I don’t know how big this incident will become, I’ll talk to the reporters so don’t worry and focus on the recording. Let’s talk after.

After hanging up, I called my brother and my parents. I told them that I would explain in detail later about thirty times. Only then did I go find the girls. They were preparing for their performance in an event tent.

“Are you ready? I think they are done setting up the cameras, we’ll going to go up soon.”

When I said this while going in, the girls all turned to look at me. Their eyes were alarming.

LJ clicked her tongue as she said,

“Do you like experiencing dangerous things or seeking thrills? If you do, then tell me instead of going against a truck. I’ll try to work something out.”

“What?”

“Because you seem too calm for someone who returned from the scene of an accident.”

What did she mean ‘calm’? I explained that my appearance wasn’t everything, but Im Seoyoung rushed to me and slapped my arm.

“Oppa! Oppa, you are seriously unbelievable! Why do you do this?”

“What?”

“Oppa, a while ago, no, you were almost in an accident just now! We took deep breaths to calm our beating hearts, yet oppa is talking about the performance like nothing…! You were almost in a car accident! A car accident!”

Her small palm hit my arm multiple times.

“I know. I know, but I suddenly thought it was an opportunity. Since they said this incident was spreading on social media and if you perform your title track here, it might become a huge topic if we’re lucky…”

The more I talked, the more chilly the atmosphere became. LJ was glaring at me, and Lee Taehee was blankly staring at me with her arms crossed. I didn’t know what Lee Songha was doing as she had her back towards me and wasn’t looking in my direction.

Im Seoyoung stomped her feet hard. Then she tilted her head up and looked at me mercilessly. Her fierce eyes were wet with tears.

“An opportunity? If, if, if you were hurt, do you think we’ll be happy if we used this opportunity to perform and gain popularity? Do-don’t tell me… you were thinking this as you jumped in?”

“Of course not.”

No matter how much I wanted to increase Neptune’s popularity, would I really do something that crazy? I was firmly shaking my head and comforting them when Lee Taehee came up to us. Then she tapped Im Seoyoung’s shoulder.

“Stop for now and get ready for the performance. Oppa… Either way, he created this opportunity by risking his life so we need to do well.”

While she looked calm compared to Im Seoyoung and LJ, her gaze was a bit chilly as she looked at me. After calming Im Seoyoung down, she stood in front of me. With a sigh, she said,

“Don’t do anything dangerous from now on.”

“Taehee, it’s you who should-“

Damn. I began confusing the future that didn’t happen and the changed present. While clicking my tongue, I looked at Lee Taehee’s arms. They were thin and so white that they looked pale. With those arms that looked like they would break if I gripped them too hard, she had pushed my back.

“Me?”

“You should be careful too. Don’t jump into an incident and avoid it.”

“I don’t have the ability to jump in. My athletic ability is garbage.”

She said while shrugging her shoulders.

I suddenly became curious about what she thought when she did that. What was she thinking when she rushed in front of the truck and pushed my back? Well… Since it didn’t happen, I wouldn’t be able to hear an answer in the future.

“We’re okay, but talk with Songha.”

“Songha?”

I was worried because she kept her back turned towards me. When I came close, her state was a bit, no, very odd.

She was holding her phone with her fingers that were so pale they were like a mannequin’s. On the screen were the lyrics of their title track ‘Satellite’ that they were going to sing on the stage.

“Why the lyrics all of a sudden?”

“… I can’t remember the lyrics.”

She said with a stiff face. Her black eyes trembled as though they had lost their way. For her to not remember the lyrics… She looked more scared than when she was in front of the truck, holding the baby, in the future I saw.

I bent my knees and stared directly at her face.

“Were you that surprised? It really wasn’t much. You saw it too. I’m not hurt anywhere.”

“You could have been hurt really bad. You could have even died. In a place I couldn’t see you, without me knowing…”

“Songha, Songha.”

Her white face almost looked blue. It seemed that her mind was filled with thoughts of me getting carried away in an ambulance as a bloody mess or with all my bones broken.

“Hey, why would I die? It’s not like I jumped in front of an oncoming truck or did some stunt in the air. All I did was open the door and dragged the driver out when the truck stopped. I value my life too so don’t be so worried…”

I said while smiling gently, but Lee Songha suddenly grabbed my

arm.

Her eyes, which were trembling like a stormy sea, gradually calmed down. Calmer than ever, her eyes stared directly at me for a long time. Only when my legs started to go numb did she say in a small voice,

“Don’t do it again.”

“Okay, I got it.”

She let go only after hearing my reply.

At a sudden thought, I slowly looked around at Lee Songha and the other girls.

If, in the future I saw, the truck didn’t charge at Lee Songha and Lee Taehee and if that last moment wasn’t embedded in my mind, then I might not have jumped into this incident this much.

I realized that Neptune had become a significant part of my life.

“Oppas, you’re so cool! You look better than on TV!”

“Euah! Their looks are amazing in real life! How could they be so unbelievably pretty?”

“Can’t they just film here instead of going somewhere else?”

The power of celebrities was incredible.

People were crowded around the stage, even so far back that it made you wonder if they could even see them. There were also a lot of people looking down from two or three-story buildings nearby. It seemed like the truck incident had already thrown back into a corner of their minds as everyone’s face was filled with excitement.

The ‘Now, We’ members skillfully heated the mood. Entertainment show veterans were on another level. Even in such a sudden situation, their back-and-forth was natural like flowing water.

Neptune and even the child actors were waving their hands with a smile.

It felt like I was the only one here who was stiff. Fortunately, I didn’t show it.

Of course, I had seen a lot of stages while going around with Neptune, and there were countless times when the number of spectators exceeded this. However, I was always below or behind the stage.

It was my first time being on stage, sharing the attention.

The gazes on me were very uncomfortable. There were even some people who murmured my name, but whenever I heard my name, it felt like another wrinkle appeared on my face. As expected, this wasn't my preference.

While I was clicking my tongue, Hwang Jaehyun approached me, holding a mic.

"Everyone, this is Neptune's manager, Mr. Jung Sunwoo. You were all surprised before, right? We were very surprised as well when we heard that the person who went off to the bathroom had caught a drunken driver on the scene."

Laughter erupted from below the stage. The people who had been looking at other celebrities were turning to look at me one after another. I greeted the people who waved their hands as they faced their phone cameras towards me when I saw a familiar face in the crowd.

Kim Taejong. He was standing next to his girlfriend and looking at me with a stupid expression. He looked the same as in my memory. When I greeted him by gesturing with my eyes, he became surprised. Seeing this, I felt like my slightly stiff shoulders relax.

"Now, say something to the crowd."

Hwang Jaehyung handed me the mic.

“Umm. It’s fortunate that not many people were hurt.”

I added a few simple words after that before handing the mic back. After hearing people cheer in front of me, I felt like I was going deaf.

Hwang Jaehyun spoke to the crowd again,

“Since we can’t just end it like this, Neptune here will perform a song. Please give them a lou… It seems you will. Ow, my ears. Then we’ll start Neptune’s special performance!”

Soon, Neptune’s performance began, accompanied by a violin melody.

The other celebrities and I came down from the stage and watched their performance like the other spectators. The scenes of the celebrities following the girls’ choreography was clearly captured by the ENG and jib cameras.

At first, the people’s attention was divided into two. There were many people who were looking at the ‘Now, We’ team rather than Neptune’s performance. However, a few seconds after the intro, their gazes were directed at the stage as though their eyes were dragged by the collar to look in that direction.

I looked at each of the girls who were buried under the cheers.

Their performance was perfect, which meant I was worried for

nothing. Even Lee Songha, who I was the most worried about, looked completely fine on stage.

It was an unfamiliar stage. It was an unexpected, sudden performance. Yet, this performance made those watching more excited than any of their other performances, even their music broadcast comeback performance which they had reduced their sleep to prepare for.

It didn't seem I was the only one who felt this way as cheers loud enough to shake Sinchon rang out. During Lee Taehee's part, people slapped the backs of the person next to them and admired her, they went wild during LJ's rap, and they waved their hands friendlily at Im Seoyoung. They also crazily pressed their shutters at Lee Songha.

At some point, voices popped up, telling them that one song wasn't enough and to perform another, asking for an encore, and even asking they hold a guerrilla concert right here. In fact, the celebrity members, including Hwang Jaehyun, sloppily followed the choreography as they sang the encore.

I took a step back and captured this scene with my two eyes.

Without me realizing, a satisfied smile hung on my lips.

Chapter 96: From Now On, We're (5)

The recording began again.

As the mood was too heated, it wasn't appropriate to continue the mission so we pushed through the crowd and returned to the van. Everyone flopped down like corpses and panted heavily. They looked like they had evacuated to an air-raid shelter to avoid bombs.

I leaned against the back of the seat and closed my eyes when I heard rustling sounds from the passenger's seat. Then Lee Songha came closer and said,

"Oppa."

"Yeah, what?"

"Look at my eyes."

"Your eyes? Is there a problem?"

I immediately turned around to examine her. I saw her black pupils within her eyes, which were so delicate they looked like they were drawn. She looked like she had firmly resolved herself. Should I say she was giving off a 'tragic beauty' look?

Rather than pulling out a marker, it seemed like she was

unsheathing a sword… A marker?

“Why did you take that out?”

“Oppa’s already under my hypnosis.”

“What?”

Astonished, I looked at her, but Lee Songha stealthily avoided my gaze. Then she stretched her arm out and scribbled something on my forehead. When I looked at my forehead in the rear-view mirror, I saw ‘Lee Songha’ written prominently on it.

“Hey, I told you to use it on someone else-“

“It can’t be helped since I can’t allow you to do something dangerous elsewhere again.”

“Your expression is too happy for something that ‘can’t be helped’.”

“… No.”

It was too late to try to change your expression now.

The people in the back seats giggled as they watched us, even the young Song Yuri. Then Lee Taehee patted Lee Songha’s shoulder,

saying that she did well and that ‘it’s probably best if you stick with oppa’.

I lightly rubbed my forehead. Well, this did make me come to my senses.

To be honest, I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to focus 100% on the recording because of the sudden incident. My head was complicated with thoughts about the news and how the incident was quickly spreading on the internet.

However, after she scribbled her name on my forehead, the fog in front of me seemed to clear a little.

I did resolve myself that I would give it my all since I was already appearing on the show. I cleared my head and decided to focus on the entertainment show recording right now.

Producer Bae Junghwan opened the driver’s seat door.

“Mr. Sunwoo, we’ll move after you foresee the second future.”

Then he handed me the box containing dice. Everyone’s gaze was on me. When I gathered the dice with a serious expression, Hwang Jaehyun and Im Joowon jolted up from their seats.

“No, don’t be like that, Mr. Sunwoo. Don’t make such a serious face, it’s scary now.”

“Really. I thought it was a concept before but then there was a huge accident. I think I’ll believe it if you told me you really saw the future and acted like that.”

“Foresee a peaceful future, a peaceful one.”

I dearly wished for that as well. With crooked lips, I threw the dice.

30 minutes later, we arrived at a park.

Bright yellow, lush forsythia beds and a tunnel of plum blossoms that fluttered whenever the wind blew. It was an entirely peaceful sight.

Not us, just the sight.

The Superhuman team members read each other’s moods. The foresight was simple. The Superhuman team, after 30 minutes, in the Neulpureum Park, must sacrifice two comrades and capture two members of the Researcher team.

Whoever it was, he was crap at throwing dice.

Since what was foreseen had to occur in reality, this meant that two members had to be dragged over to the other team. After a short meeting, Hwang Jaehyun was responsible for Song Yuri and

the others were to survive on their own.

While we were looking around at trails we could escape and hide in, we saw familiar faces at the entrance of the park. Unaware of the foresight, they swarmed at us as though we were a banquet.

Everyone rushed towards the escape route they had chosen. I also stuck next to Lee Songha and pushed through the maze-like trail.

“That’s why you should have hypnotized a Researcher team member instead of me-“

“I have no regrets.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Lee Songha said in a resolute face,

“If someone chases us, quickly hide behind me.”

“What are you going to do by hiding me?”

“Since I’m the master right now, I have to protect you.”

I grinned without realizing it. Ah, so moved that tears filled my eyes.

“Like this, we might both be dragged off to the research lab.”

“I don’t think that’s bad in its own wa-“

“What do you mean it’s not bad!”

It seemed they knew we were joking with each other even while running away as the cameramen smiled with their faces looking like Hahoe masks.

But for some reason, I heard another pair of smaller footsteps besides the cameramen.

I turned around to see if it was Lee Taehee, but it was Song Yuri, who was chasing us with her short legs.

“Uh, why didn’t you go with Mr. Hwang Jaehyun and come over here?”

Since Hwang Jaehyun had the ability to stop time, the probability of surviving was probably higher with him. Also, Hwang Jaehyun had been taking care of Song Yuri, telling her to just trust and follow him.

Panting already, Song Yuri said,

“I think I’ll be a bother if I went with them.”

“And if you come with us?”

“Here, you’re going to…”

Song Yuri dragged off after checking the cameramen. Well, she probably meant that, since the likelihood of Lee Songha and I surviving was low, she wouldn’t be a bother to us.

Either way, we were fleeing with her when the cameraman assigned to me said,

“Apparently, Ms. Lee Taehee has been caught?”

“What?”

When I asked due to being taken aback, the cameraman showed me his phone screen. Lee Taehee had a mask over her eyes and was detained by the Researcher team. No, she was detained, but she looked comfortable as if she was at home.

“Her superpower is teleportation, yet how was she caught within a few minutes? Was she crawling?”

I said, naturally dumbfounded.

Now that Lee Taehee was caught, if Lee Songha or I was also caught in vain, then things would become troublesome. It would be fortunate if LJ and Im Seoyoung were doing well on the other

team, but if not, then this part was ruined.

Our airtime was a problem, and it would be difficult to face Producer Bae and the entertainment team.

While I was pondering what I should do to make things entertaining, I heard a commotion behind me. From then on, we were chased constantly. Also, the ones chasing us were three members of the ‘Now We’ team so we were finished the moment we were caught.

How long had this game of tag continued? Song Yuri was panting heavily as she stopped.

“Just, just leave me here and run.”

“What?”

“I’m a kid anyways. Won’t they leave me alive?”

Song Yuri, who had been saying this while waving her hand, became shocked and looked at the cameramen. Then, clasping her hands together, she repeatedly begged for what she said not to go on air. Were all child actors like her? She was the textbook example of a grownup child.

After asking for the cameramen’s understanding, Song Yuri continued to talk while covering her mic.

“I came on the show to change my image. Some people said that I was creepy because I wasn’t child-like. Wouldn’t it seem more child-like if I was caught here? Kids are like that.”

“No, you acting like this is more creepy.”

Song Yuri’s expression became strange. I knew I made a mistake when I said that.

“Sorry, I said that out of my habit of talking to the quadruplets.”

“… Quadruplets? Are they young?”

“They are probably two years older than you.”

While I was speaking, Lee Songha, who had been going around looking like a warrior, saying that she would protect me, tapped my back.

“Oppa, I think they are coming.”

“Since it looks like it’ll be difficult to keep running away, let’s hide for now. I have a pretty decent idea.”

I took Lee Songha and Song Yuri, who were tilting their heads, and hid in the nearby forest. The cameramen filmed us from the back while lowering their bodies. It seemed they had separated to

look for us as their loud voices communicating with each other came closer.

I slightly held Song Yuri's shoulder and said,

"Now, go out."

"Pardon?"

"If you act as bait and lure someone, I'll grab him."

Since the three of them wouldn't rush together to capture a tiny child.

"Lure? Isn't that too shameless?"

Song Yuri asked with a dumbfounded face. The hidden meaning should be 'too shameless for a child to do'. Beside me, Lee Songha mumbled that she thought it was a good idea. I rolled up my sleeves as I said,

"What is shameless? If we're caught, we going to be dragged off to the research lab."

"When you play with the quadruplets, do you…"

"Those kids are stronger than me. If they were faced with this

situation, then they would have already offered me up as a sacrifice and ran away."

Ah, right. The cameras.

I quickly looked towards the cameras behind me and added,

"Of course, they are good kids. They are just too competitive from growing up in a jungle."

Song Yuri seemed like she was thinking whether this was how a child should act, but in the end, she followed my words and went out as bait. The Researcher team members easily took the bait. The big fish that were baited were caught be Lee Songha and me.

As things proceeded smoothly, at some point, Lee Songha and Song Yuri rushed out more passionately than me. Lee Songha mumbled some strange words like how it felt like a crime family, and Song Yuri's expression now looked like a child's.

By the time we heard that Im Joowon was dragged away by LJ, we were thinking about who, among the three Researcher team members we caught, we should let free.

When I asked my cameraman how we were, he gave me a thumb's up.

In the center of the city, lights from neon signs rippled like waves.

After filming in two more locations, we parked the van in a nearby parking lot, waiting for the final recording. We set the DMB to PBS News.

Everyone gulped their saliva as they alternated between their phones and the DMB screen. I was thinking that it might not happen in the end, but Producer Bae's words put the final nail in the coffin.

That the incident in Sinchon would go out on the news as a brief.

"There are already quite a few internet articles. Social media is bustling with footage and stories of people who witnessed the incident. It has become a huge fuss on the internet while we were filming. No wonder our stylists were staring at their phones.

At Hwang Jaehyun's words, the two captured Researcher team members nodded.

"Apparently, reporters contacted our company? Our CEO hyung freaked out when a local news reporter, not an entertainment reporter, contacted him, thinking that I caused an accident."

"Hey, our names appeared on the accident report. It's not like we committed a crime, but it feels weird. I thought that the day my name appeared on an accident report, my life as a celebrity would be over."

“There is a lot of discussion about Mr. Sunwoo. Did you see them? Wow, Neptune’s quite something too.”

“Their performance was great. I bet those who saw the fancams have Neptune’s name embedded in their minds? Don’t tell me once Neptune members become top stars, we won’t be able to cast them because of their schedules or something?”

Hwang Jaehyun looked at Lee Songha and quietly said,

“Just in case, write a contract saying that you’ll appear once more.”

“Ah, hyung. Asking for a contract is going too far. Let’s first exchange phone numbers.”

My ears perked up while I was blankly looking at my phone screen. When I turned around, Park Jongtae, who was the talkative type among the ‘Now We’ members, was about to hand her his phone when he took it back.

“Hey, hey, did you see her manager’s expression just now? His expression read, ‘You want to get my girls’ numbers? You have to go through me first.’”

“No, he was saying not to even try if you don’t have the courage to strike him down.”

“Girl group managers are just that scary.”

“I think I know why the drunken driver was instantly restrained. Just think about that expression glaring at you. That person probably felt that his life was in danger?”

These people.

“… My expression wasn’t that bad.”

My expression just stiffened because I was a bit sensitive towards these things after dealing with Punchline’s crazy bastard. They joked, saying, ‘Anyone would say it is that bad,’ and ‘It really is that bad.’ Just as I was wondering how I would shut them up, Lee Songha grabbed my arm.

“Oppa, I think the news is starting.”

***

In another parking lot, the Researcher team’s white van was parked temporarily as well.

The scene inside was similar. They were all chatting while they waited for the news brief to start on the DMB. Under the dim lights, Im Seoyoung’s eyes shined in a meaningful light as though she was about to tell a strange story.

“Sometimes, it’s really strange. Oppa got us Next K-Star and that

did well. Oppa handed Lee Songha Cat Guardian Ghost, saying that he thought it would be a hit, and it did."

"It was a huuuge hit."

Im Joowon, who was handcuffed, mumbled with a depressed face.

"Anything else? Nuna, is there anything else?"

The mixed-race child actor, Alex, urged Im Seoyoung. He was so focused on her story that his tired eyes shined. Im Seoyoung trembled due to his cuteness and nodded her head.

"And this time, Sunwoo oppa actively pushed Taehee unni's song to be a title track and it did well. It reached the top ten."

"Oh my god. How desirable. That manager."

"At this rate, is his ancestor helping him? Or there is something about him?"

The people inside the van reacted with glittering eyes.

Not long after, a member of the 'Now We' team looked at a camera and yawned.

“That’s good. Junghwan hyung should be able to do something with this.”

“Since that manager picked ‘future prophet’, if he edits it with the Sinchon incident, then I bet it’ll look quite believable?”

Im Joowon suddenly asked the Neptune members,

“Is there anything else? Something that didn’t occur yet that he said?”

“Something that didn’t occur yet…”

As if she remembered something, LJ shrugged her shoulders.

“I do remember one thing, but he said this in a joking manner a few months ago.”

“What is it?”

“That we’ll take first place on a music broadcast.”

Eyes rolling in thought, Im Joowon abruptly asked,

“Hyung, when will today’s recording air?”

“Usually, it airs after two weeks. But I don’t know if they’ll air it

a week early before the hot-topicness fades. But why are you asking?”

Im Joowon grinned as he said,

“Maybe Neptune will get first before our episode airs.”

The same time, people crowded around the enormous TV in the W&U lounge. A few people, including Kim Hyunjo and employees from the PR Team, were staring intently at the screen.

Chief Jo, who got off the elevator and headed towards the vending machines, tilted his head when he discovered this scene.

“What’s this? Why are you all gathered around the TV? Is something happening today?”

“Mr. Sunwoo is appearing on the news. Maybe even Neptune.”

At Team Leader Park’s words, Chief Jo swiftly took a spot.

“Jung Sunwoo? Why is he appearing on the news and not the entertainment show? Did he cause an incident?”

“He did.”

Kim Hyunjo replied, as if at a loss for words. During this time,

the news anchor's remarks concerning a gruesome murder ended, and finally, the news briefing began.

{This is the main news brief and incident for today.

While drunk, Mr. A, who was in his forties, drove his water bottle truck into a crowd of civilians and was caught by the police with the help of a civilian.

The water bottle truck charged out of an alley. Even though the civilians are shocked and fleeing, he doesn't stop. Fortunately, girl group Neptune's manager, 27-year-old Jung Sunwoo, was at the scene and settled the incident by dragging the driver out of the truck.

It was later revealed that he had discovered the drunken driver and reported to 112 before searching for the truck.}

Listening to the anchor's recorded voice, Chief Jo blinked.

The scene where a water bottle truck was causing a fuss like a wild buffalo in a vehicle restricted area and shocked civilians fleeing from it played on the screen.

When the truck stopped momentarily after ramming into the traffic cones, someone jumped towards the truck and dragged the driver out.

"Hey, there he is. It's Mr. Sunwoo!"

“What the heck, you can clearly see his face!”

“I’ll contact PBS’s newsroom and request the full news brief video and a clean version!”

Excited voices erupted in the lounge. They were so loud that other team employees came over to the TV to see what was going on. During this time, Chief Jo stared at the familiar face on the screen with a foolish expression.

The anchor continued.

{This incident has become more trendy after it was later revealed that ‘From Now On, We’re’ team members and their guests, including Neptune, who had arrived at Sinchon to film their program, purposely gathered civilians’ attention to bring them away from the scene of the incident…}

Hahoe mask – traditional Korean masks

Grownup child – A child that acts like an adult

DMB – Digital Multimedia Broadcasting, TV and radio for mobile.

Chapter 97: Splashing while Riding a Sudden Current (1)

While it was a short news brief, its effect was enormous.

If the witness testimonies and internet articles posted during the day were oil, then this news brief had pretty much set it on fire.

The picture captured from the news brief was instantly sweeping through social media and large community forums. As there were more than one or two celebrities involved, the magnitude of how trendy it had become was also incredible.

Because of this, the PR team office was noisiest it had been since Neptune's comeback.

"How are the reactions towards the four Neptune members?"

At Team Leader Park's question, the PR team employees focused on their tablets and answered,

"A huge hit! While the incident can't be bad for them, it's the first time people's reactions have been so heated since their comeback!"

"Their performance in Sinchon was a divine move. The reactions to the fancams are amazing. At this rate, the number of views for their performance will be higher than the views for their music

video on their official channel.”

“Their image can’t be any better right now!”

The female employee, who had been stomping her feet from excitement, suddenly snorted.

“Neptune’s Neptune, but team leader, Mr. Sunwoo has completely left an impression on the public! Here someone said, ‘Seriously, shouldn’t W&U kowtow to Manager Jung Sunwoo?’”

“Here too. ‘Doesn’t the celebrity management association give out manager of the month awards or anything?’”

“Give it here.”

Team Leader Park stretched out her hand. The female employee, who had been tearing up from laughing so hard, handed over her tablet. A page from an entertainment community forum was open. Team Leader Park, who had been clicking on related posts and scrolling through comments, paused her finger.

- Because the entertainment shows Neptune have been on since their comeback were a bit boring, their fans were anticipating another entertainment show with Manager Jung. They were hoping for another hit like Star Manager… But for there to be a hit on the news.
- They said they were going on an entertainment show, not ONLY an entertainment show. One shot, two kills!
- I just came back from Neptune’s official site, and it’s so funny. If Manager Jung said that he’ll be going to another celebrity, it seems their fans are going to pull him by his pant leg and tackle him at every step.
- He’s been quite talked about amongst Neptune’s original core fans.

- Apparently, the video on the news was filmed by ‘Now We’s filming crew. Since they say it’ll be more detailed in their broadcast, I guess I’ll be tuning in after a long time.
- But I think there are a lot of people interested in Neptune through this incident.
- I’m one of them. I saw the fancam of their performance, and the quality of their performance was amazing, despite the fact the members must have been shocked by the incident as well. I was supposed to go to Sinchon today, but it sucks I couldn’t go.
- Although Neptune’s talent has already been confirmed on Next K-Star, that song keeps getting better the more I listen to it. I’ve been playing that one song on repeat the whole day.
- Apparently, that song was made by Lee Taehee, but it’s so addictive.
- It’s not the one by Simon Lee? I thought I saw it in articles?
- That’s another song. That song has been mentioned more because of Simon Lee, but they released double title tracks. Lee Taehee composed and wrote this one on her own. Their fans were sad about its ranking, but it explodes like this.
- A lot of people around me listen to that song. I feel like it’ll be a huge hit.

“You’re constantly checking the music rankings, right?”

The employees nodded at Team Leader Park’s question.

“We are checking it through an app every hour. They were third and fifth before.”

When Neptune’s name first appeared on the 5-minute prediction chart on a major music site, all the employees who worked on Neptune’s mini-album, including the PR Team and the Management Business Department Team 3, stopped what they were doing and cheered.

Lee Taehee’s song ‘Satellite’ was third. ‘Pisces’ was fifth.

“It’s almost time, check again. I feel like it might have gone up.”

“Yes, since it was on the news, maybe it’ll be second?”

“They could have been first if it wasn’t for the Sugar Cats.”

“My words exactly! BYG fans are creating a fuss right now! Saying ‘they need to work hard and stream the song so that they don’t lose first place’ and ‘to endure until they got first on a music broadcast’. While our Blackout fandom is hardcore, they aren’t worse either. Oh my, it’s first.”

“Huh? What?”

The male employee asked when the female employee abruptly ended her sentence. Team Leader Park, who had been only starting at her tablet screen, turned her gaze towards her. The female employee showed them her phone with wide eyes.

“Satellite is first!”

That moment, the phones in the PR Team’s office began to ring noisily. Having enjoyed this sound for a few seconds, Team Leader Park said in a big voice,

“Now, now. I’ll face the reporters so you tell Chief Kim Hyunjo and you tell Mr. Sunwoo… Wait, are they done?”

“I got a message saying that they had finished a while ago and were eating dinner with the cast!”

“Then call and tell him the news! That the song he pushed is first right now!”

***

“Your glass is empty? Have another glass of cola, Mr. Sunwoo.”

“Ah, thank you.”

“I’m the one who should be thankful. Even my CEO hyung told me to give you his thanks.”

Lee Yoonho filled my glass with cola. Since he asked that we should help each other out in case we need some personal connections, I readily exchanged phone numbers with him. With this, my phone contacts were filled with personal numbers of all the ‘Now We’ members.

“Move over, hyung.”

Im Joowon pushed Lee Yoonho away and sat next to me.

“What is Ms. Lee Songha’s next project? If it gets decided, let me know. So I can consider it.”

“It hasn’t been decided yet.”

Im Joowon clicked his tongue and chugged the last of his beer.

“I need to pick a good next project. I’m suffering from insomnia these days, insomnia. Damn company, I should change to a better-“

“That’s why I told you to come to W&U.”

I said jokingly while pouring beer when Im Joowon blinked.

“What? Are you proposing an exclusive contract?”

Why was he acting like this was his first time hea-... Then I remembered.

Damn it. That happened in the previous future.

I quickly came up with a believable excuse and clicked my tongue. After seeing that future, which had no static nor was it far off into the future, I kept getting confused.

The biggest problem was that I wasn’t completely certain whether this current situation was real or not. After getting my future foresight ability, I had been worried that I might get a mental illness on multiple occasions, but I didn’t have to worry about that any longer.

To get reality and non-reality confused… I was already amazingly mental. Haha.

I was laughing dispiritedly when my phone rang.

After a few seconds, the thoughts that had filled my head were swept away. As soon as I hung up, I downed the cola in front of me. It felt like the carbonation had pierced through my veins and were spreading throughout my body.

Of course, I did hold some hope since I heard that the song was going up in ranks.

Maybe it might reach first? No, since it was trending this much, wasn't there a possibility? Even while thinking this, I had swallowed my expectations so that I wouldn't have to feel disappointed like the first day.

Swallowing my dry saliva, I opened an app on my phone.

It was there. First. 'Satellite' was on the very top of the list.

I tightly gripped my phone and looked beside me. The girls were chatting with other cast members while eating.

"Girls, one moment. First, put down your spoons and swallow what you have in your mouths."

“Pardon?”

“I have something to tell you, but I’m worried you might spit out what you’re eating.”

At my words, the girls hesitantly put down their spoons. Lee Taehee took her hand off the beer glass she had been holding onto like a treasure. Even Lee Songha quickly swallowed the mouthful of crab carapace bibimbap that had been in her mouth.

When the chatty girls quieted down, the other cast members looked in my direction.

Im Seoyoung staggered over to me and asked,

“Wh-what is it, oppa? You’re making me nervous.”

“It is-“

“Wait! If it’s something bad, say that first! So that we can prepare our hearts!”

“We are first on the music charts.”

I showed them my phone screen as I said this.

“It’s not just here. Apparently, it’s first on seven charts.”

While talking, I felt the tips of my lips curl upwards. The girls didn't react for a few seconds. Instead, it was the other celebrities who tapped their glasses with their chopsticks and said,

"Wow! Really? Are they really first? Is it some kind of day today?"

"Oh my god. Congrats! Isn't this the same as climbing back up the charts?"

"Let's have an after party!"

During this commotion, Im Seoyoung snatched my phone. The girls pressed their heads together and looked at the screen.

Soon, Lee Taehee's light brown eyes widened and alternated between the screen and me. Lee Songha blinked her eyes twice before nodding.

Soon, Im Seoyoung let out an incredible scream.

"Uh, uuh, oppa. Is this real? This isn't photoshopped?"

"No way, if it really is, I'm going to break this bottle."

LJ added while grabbing a bottle.

“Don’t worry since it’s not photoshopped. Don’t break that bottle either.”

When I said while laughing, only then did they cheer. Im Seoyoung, who had the most severe mood swings, teared up already. She was biting her lips and enduring because there were other celebrities around her. If she was at home, she would have already burst into tears.

“Euaaah, screenshot! I’m going to screenshot it a million times!”

“Why a million.”

“The music charts are a war zone. Do you know how many songs don’t last an hour?! We might drop from first in an hour too!”

“Do you want it to go down? It hasn’t been long since you told me not to say unlucky words.”

Surprised by LJ’s scolding, Im Seoyoung quickly held my arm and mumbled, ‘Cancel. Cancel.’ When would she stop with this?”

“Let’s screenshot it first, then print it. Should we print it in the size of a wedding photo? So that we can frame it and put it up in the living room?”

“Don’t do that, dummy. I’m going to have nightmares.”

The members of ‘Now We’ were chuckling as they passed around the bomb shot they had carefully created. Hwang Jaehyun handed me one as well. I readily accepted it with both hands. I only drank cola until now because I had to drive, but now I felt I needed to drink a little.

“Since our recording today was a hit and Neptune’s song is a hit, let’s hit three consecutive home runs with the success of our broadcast!”

“Let’s do it!”

The glasses clinked loudly. Even the girls, who were partly happy and partly dazed, quickly joined in this cheerful mood. While successively downing glasses, I suddenly thought of something and took out my phone.

“In celebration of being first on the charts, let’s take a group photo. Gather!”

“Im Seoyoung in the middle!”

The girls gathered together in a familiar manner when the ‘Now We’ team members joined in around them.

“The spot next to Songha is mine!”

“Ah, damn. Are you senile? Don’t bring up any ulterior motives and moved aside! She’s young enough to be your daughter, hyung!”

“Won’t the people at the end be cut out? Get closer!”

I was about to press the shutter when I asked,

“This might go up on our official social media account, will that be okay?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!”

“Since we ran around together for the entire day, we need to take a group photo! If there wasn’t alcohol, we should have brought the kids as well. What a shame.”

Since everyone said they were fine with it, I was about to press the shutter when-

“But Mr. Sunwoo should join in too.”

Hwang Jaehyun gestured to me while telling me to ask someone else to take the picture. I handed my phone to someone’s manager and went over to the group. Lee Songha almost crumpled in order to make room for me. I was barely able to stick my head out, and the picture was taken.

The girls took a few more photos before sending it to the PR Team, and it immediately went up on their official social media account. My face was clearly in the photo.

Below the photo were the words, ‘Neptune’s first song to reach 1st!’

Below that was Im Seoyoung’s comment, ‘The happiest night.’

Im Seoyoung predicted that the song would only last for an hour, but ‘Satellite’ didn’t drop down after an hour. Not even the morning after the sleepless night. Not even the next day when the dark clouds had cleared and warm sunlight shined down. Even the day after that.

It continued to be first.

Neptune handled their schedule almost in a trance for the next few days.

Interviews poured in from internet news and magazines, and they appeared on various entertainment and culture shows from public and cable networks.

Ah, and they really hung the screenshot of the music chart in their living room. Im Seoyoung was so moved that she cried every day looking at that picture. With LJ as a witness, apparently, Lee Taehee secretly looked at it too.

Either way, that was how the team didn't tire out and handled their busy schedule like a runaway engine with the fuel known as 'first in the charts' for the next few days.

The day of TVL's Kpop concert live broadcast returned.

For the first time since they debuted, Neptune was one of the first place candidates.

The area behind the fences in the street corner leading from the parking lot to the broadcasting station was crowded with fans, who were waiting to see the singers appearing on the music broadcast, today as well. People with camcorders, phones, and even DSLRs with long lens shouted and pressed their shutters every time a celebrity passed by.

It was the same scene I had seen since I started working as a manager.

Of course, there were some changes.

"It's Neptune, Neptune! Please look over here for a moment!"

"Unni, please give me your autograph!"

"Mr. Manager! Since the day is good, it's okay to take a picture with Neptune, right?!"

I remembered how there were no reactions on my first day, to the point it was almost embarrassing, but there were quite a few people looking and gesturing at us.

Also, while they might not know each member's name, it seemed like everyone knew the name 'Neptune', seeing as other idol fans were looking at us and murmuring amongst each other.

The problem was that they weren't only looking at Neptune, they were looking at me as well.

We had stopped for a moment so they could give autographs and get their pictures taken when a familiar male fan asked,

"Mr. Manager, I heard that W&U are gathering members for Neptune's first official fan club? Please give us some official information."

"News gets around fast."

"What's the name of their fandom? Everyone's worried about that."

"Why?"

The male fan glanced at his surroundings before saying in a quiet voice,

“The Sugar Cats’ fandom has been confirmed, and it’s ‘Nyan-Butlers’. ‘Nyan-Butlers’. It’s not some sort of humiliation play, think about dark-skinned male fans and uncles going ‘Nyan, nyan.’ Wow, crap. That sent shivers down my spine. I bet even thousand-year hardcore fandoms will chill with that name. Please tell me it’s not something like that.”

“Yeah, it’s not.”

The official fandom name we were planning on using was ‘Triton’. Something about it being Neptune’s biggest satellite. I quickly glossed over it because it wasn’t official yet, but the male fan asked another question. This time, he said it in a voice so quiet even the girls would hear it.

“But, it’ll be difficult to be first today, what if the girls are disappointed? While they shouldn’t lose out much in broadcast, sales, or album portions, but that damn voting portion. They just had to be faced up against the Sugar Cats, no, BYG.”

The male fan glanced at the crowd of BYG fans. Compared to other fans, they were different in terms of numbers and spirit. Because of them, the company and Neptune weren’t hoping for first today.

Because real-time text voting would apply when choosing first place.

We monitored internet reactions, and BYG fans were uniting, saying that, while they lost getting first place in the charts, they

must get first on the music broadcast. They were so spirited that it seemed like they might borrow phones from distant relatives to vote.

I was licking my lips when I heard a commotion behind us.

Looking behind me, the Sugar Cats were waving at the excessive photo takers as they made their way towards us. Then, as if they discovered us, they stopped in their tracks. Perhaps it was because of the numerous cameras or because they were certain they were going to be first today, their expressions were bright.

They were horrible every time I saw them.

I glanced at Neptune, and their expressions weren't bad either. LJ put on a calm face and, like as though she was a ventriloquist, mumbled, 'We run into each other often even though I don't like seeing your faces.'

I patted the grumbling male fan's shoulder and said,

"Either way, give your vote when the voting starts later."

"Of course. But still…"

"Still, you never know."

Until you show your hand.

Bibimbap is a Korean rice dish where you mix rice with various vegetables and sauce, usually chili pepper paste. The crab carapace, in this case, is used as the bowl.

In Korean, it’s ‘uncle fans’, but I kept it as uncles. Basically, middle-aged fans.

Chapter 98: Splashing while Riding a Sudden Current (2)

Neptune's waiting room was in the middle of the hallway. When I opened the door, it was like a completely new world.

"It's so big! It's bigger than my room!"

"Is this really our waiting room? Did they put the wrong name on the door?"

Im Seoyoung chattered, saying how they could practice their choreography here to their hearts' content, while Lee Taehee and Lee Songha looked satisfied as they sat down on the plush sofa. Without doubtful eyes, LJ went out to check if this really was our waiting room and returned.

Compared to the chicken coop we used last year, this was a 5-star hotel. Even the waiting room we used during their comeback was only half the size of this room.

I always felt this, but in this damn entertainment industry, popularity was everything.

"Oppa, are we really using this room all on our own? Has our level really increased this much?"

"Well, while that might be part of it, it's also probably because

you girls are first place candidates today.”

Immediately, the mood in the waiting room became strange. Im Seoyoung, who was reading everyone’s mood, fiddled with her flare skirt as she said,

“I, I really came here with no expectations. After being nervous that we might be disbanded during the two years we’ve debuted, just being one of the first place candidates already feels like I’ve been hit with luck! We even placed first on the music charts! My heart is peace itself right now, oppa!”

No, you seemed very agitated right now.

Im Seoyoung, who had been chatting on her own without being asked, suddenly turned her head.

“Taehee unni, you don’t expect to place first too, right?”

“Yeah.”

Lee Taehee replied with half-closed eyes.

“Lee Songha, you don’t expect to place first either, right?”

“Nope.”

Lee Songha, who had been rummaging through the snack basket, nodded her head. I occasionally thought this, but, overall, the members of this team were calm and composed, yet it felt balanced since Im Seoyoung made enough fuss for four people.

Lastly, Im Seoyoung stared at LJ, who was sitting on the chair in front of the dressing table and shaking her crossed leg. Before Im Seoyoung could open her mouth, LJ said,

“The only one who’s holding expectations here is you.”

“N-no.”

“Ha! I heard you calling your parents and relatives to vote by text last night. You were even memorizing your speech if we place first. I could hear it all because the walls are thin, dummy.”

Im Seoyoung’s cheeks instantly reddened.

“Hey! If we really do place first, I won’t be able to think of anything! It’s a live broadcast! If you don’t want to look foolish, you have to memorize everything you want to say!”

“See, you are hoping for first.”

LJ’s lips curled up into a smile. Im Seoyoung, who opened and closed her mouth while flushed with anger, slumped down below the sofa and clung to my leg with an expression of holding onto a lifeline.

It seemed her emotional anxiety had flared up. She did endure for a long while.

“Euaaah, oppa, what do I do? I, I really tried not to be so hopeful!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I already know that we have no hope with the text voting since it’s a fight between fandoms, and I also know that if I get my hopes up for the hopeless, I’ll be even more disappointed. But I keep thinking of the first place trophy! To be honest, last night, I dreamed of decorating our living room with the trophy!”

She buried her face in her hands and slammed her head against the sofa.

“If oppa wasn’t next to me, I might have already lost it by now!”

More than now?

Worried that she might call herself a ‘stupid dummy’ again, I patted her round shoulders.

“What’s wrong with getting your hopes up? I’m hopeful too.”

“… You are, oppa?”

“I’m not saying this to pressure you, I’m saying it because there is a small possibility.”

I quickly added in case they felt more pressure from reading my mood like they did during the music chart ranking incident.

“I also told my brother and sister-in-law to vote. I even thought about buying the quadruplets phones so that we could get four more votes.”

Seriously.

“If you get your hopes up and we don’t place first, then…”

“Then I’ll have a drink tonight.”

I said nonchalantly. Im Seoyoung, who had been slumped over like a half-melted jelly, returned to her original state. Im Seoyoung crawled over to the seat next to the sofa when Lee Songha added as though it was no big deal,

“Honestly, I’m also a bit hopeful. You never know.”

“You too?”

Im Seoyoung quickly turned to look at her.

“Really? When your face seems like it’ll be fine if we don’t place first?”

“My face is always like this.”

“That’s true. So you got your hopes up too. It wasn’t just me.”

She blinked while glancing at Lee Taehee. Lee Taehee, who had been leaning back and massaging her long neck, said,

“Me too… A little.”

“You did too?”

“Since it’s a song I created, it’s a lie if I say I had no expectations. If we drop from the first place candidates, then I’ll have a bottle of alcohol too.”

After saying this, Lee Taehee subtly smiled in my direction. I clearly said one drink.

Now that she had heard the other girls’ inner thoughts, Im Seoyoung recovered her calm. While smiling, she looked at LJ. With her legs still crossed, LJ said,

“Do you also have your hope-“

“Nope.”

“Yeah, thought so.”

Im Seoyoung grumbled with narrowed eyes. LJ looked back at us with her arms crossed and clicked her tongue.

“So? I’m the only one in this room who hasn’t gotten ahead of herself? The mood tonight will be fantastic.”

“Congratulations on being one of the first place candidates! Isn’t this your first time in three years?”

“Truly great talents mature late. Congrats, Neptune!”

“Congratulations, Mr. Manager.”

People kept congratulating us in every waiting room we went to greet.

Singers and cast members no longer treated Neptune as old rookies, and entertainment reporters asked us questions regarding the Sugar Cats like hyenas targeting their prey.

If I let the girls answer every question, then their names would be plastered on the entertainment columns in a few hours with the added bonus of provocative headlines to increase their site traffic.

“Since the girls are too nervous today from being one of the first place candidates, I don’t think they will be able to hold any interviews. Let us do it next time.”

When I said this while guiding the girls back, a reporter now asked me for comments. It seemed I also looked like a celebrity to reporters who were thirsty for anything newsworthy.

We were on our way back to the waiting room after getting away from the reporters.

“Uh, Neptune! And their manager. Do you have a bit of time?”

A producer with a headset on his head waded through the crowd and approached us.

“The two first place candidates will be having a back-and-forth in the MC seats. I think we’ll have to rehearse it because it’s live and not a recording.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

Though I wasn’t fine seeing the faces of the Sugar Cats.

“Sugar-BYG team has more members so we’ll go to their waiting room.”

The producer smiled gently while guiding us there.

When we opened the door with ‘Sugar Cats’ and ‘BYG’ written on it together, we entered a waiting room that was twice the size of our own waiting room.

We also saw the Sugar Cats members, who sitting in front of the dressing tables and looking at their phones.

“Uh, where are the BYG members?”

When the producer asked while looking around, the chief of the Sugar Cats scratched the back of his head.

“Sorry, producer. They said that they were going to have an interview with a reporter for a bit…”

“I told you that I’ll be bringing Neptune and to wait… Where did they go?”

When the Sugar Cats’ chief and the producer went out to look for them, only the Sugar Cats and us remaining in this large room. Out of habit, I checked for any cameras. Fortunately, there were none.

Since we weren’t in a relationship where we would greet each other when nobody was around, I sat on the empty sofa with the girls. As though she had some sort of terminal illness if she didn’t lash out at Neptune, no, Im Seoyoung, Han Saetbyeol snorted as she said,

“Seoyoung, I can’t tell if you have good or bad luck, right?”

“Me? I think this is the luckiest I’ve been in the 22 years I’ve lived, why?”

Im Seoyoung shrugged her shoulders.

What was interesting was that her atmosphere was quite different in front of the Sugar Cats. If she was like a fragile bowl in front of us, she was currently a strong stone pot.

Han Saetbyeol blinked as she continued,

“No, what I mean is, you were really lucky to reach first place on the music charts, but you just had to have us as your competitor so you won’t get first place on the music broadcast. So I can’t tell whether you have good or bad-“

“Even if your tongue is short, you need to speak properly.”

Leisurely leaning against the sofa, LJ joined in.

“Did I not tell you last time? Our competitor is BYG. Even on your door, BYG’s name was above yours.”

“That’s because they are our seniors! But why do you constantly cut into our conversation?”

“Oh, that was conversing? I thought you were just speaking nonsense.”

After saying that, LJ glanced between Im Seoyoung and me before adding,

“There are no people or cameras here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I nodded my head while opening a chocolate Lee Songha handed me.

If a uselessly famous manager said something, it could become an issue, but I wasn’t worried about words exchanged between girl group members leaking out.

LJ looked at each of the Sugar Cats members and said,

“Let me use this opportunity to ask you something. Why do you hate her so much? I’ve been with her for more than three years, but she’s not the type to receive such resentment?”

Hearing her words, even Im Seoyoung looked like she was slightly interested.

Breaking the silence, a member of the Sugar Cats with a

provocative expression said,

“The way she acts is a bit, you know. So full of herself, doesn’t pay attention to the mood. While we were nervous because our debut kept falling through, she alone was easygoing, as though she was confident in debuting at any time because she was different from us.”

Her words weren’t simply thorny, her tongue was like a sword. I was about to stop this conversation because I didn’t think this would end in a simple exchange of words, but Im Seoyoung shook her head. Then she asked the Sugar Cats members,

“When was I like that? Since everyone was so anxious, I thought that I at least shou-“

“That’s being full of yourself. You’ve always looked down at us because you were the center and better at singing and dancing than us. Ah, but now that I think about it, you’re sort of in the same situation now? They say what comes around, goes around.”

The Sugar Cats member glanced at the girls as she said,

“There, the visual center is someone else, they have a lead vocalist who can write and compose her own songs, and a, well, slightly talented rapper. They are all members that are talented enough to succeed on their own, but, since you’re in the middle, besides dancing, you don’t have any-“

“There’s nothing more to hear from them, Seoyoung. It’ll only tire our ears.”

I clicked my tongue and got up since Im Seoyoung’s face became stiff. The Sugar Cats members, who had been chatting, flinched in surprise and shrunk away with expressions asking what I was going to do. While I had thought that they were hateful all this time, I really wanted to pour filthy water on them.

“Why are you all so interested in others?”

“… We were only saying that because we were worried for Seoyoung.”

“You don’t have to. We are already looking after her here.”

Lee Taehee, who had been silent, said while frowning.

Then she clicked her tongue and patted Im Seoyoung’s shoulder.

“You must have had it tough while you were on that team.”

I sincerely agreed with her. If I were amidst those girls, my heart might have become rotten and collapsed. It was so fortunate that Im Seoyoung didn’t debut with them and became a member of Neptune.

Chapter 99: Splashing while Riding a Sudden Current (3)

The girls seemed to be asking me with their eyes.

'Is that real?'

I also wanted to confirm it if there was someone beside me. Focusing my eyes, I examined the totals again. While the difference was small, Neptune's points were undoubtedly higher.

When I checked the fan seating area, that place had already broken out into celebration, rampant with cheers.

{Neptune, Congratulations!}

With a bang, gold confetti poured down onto the stage.

The LED screen was filled with their faces. Gold confetti stuck in their hair, they blinked with their widened eyes. If there was a mirror, I would probably be making the same expression.

The male MC handed Im Seoyoung the trophy. That might have been the switch as tears began to drop from her teary eyes. While Im Seoyoung was flustered and calming her tears, Lee Taehee held the mic first.

While smoothly thanking the W&U employees as well as CEO

Baek Hansung, she paused for a moment. After taking a breath, she opened her mouth once again.

{... Also, to Sunwoo oppa, who has always been by our side, we can't express how thankful we are for everything you do for us. I am truly happy that I joined such a great team. I hope that we can continue to working as a team for a long, long time.}

There was a closeup of Lee Taehee's face on the screen. Seeing this, I felt like I was listening to her face-to-face.

Below the blinding lights, Lee Taehee's eyes curved.

The camera pulled back to show all four of the girls on the screen. They were all smiling brightly. Im Seoyoung was smiling while crying.

Finally, I let out the breath I had been holding in.

Something heavy made its way up from my chest as though it would overflow at any moment. Damn. I hoped my eyes wouldn't tear up.

Rubbing my face, I looked back at the stage.

The memories of nervously running around and pushing Lee Taehee's song as a title track and tearing my hair out because the song didn't rank as high as I had expected when it was released flashed in my mind.

I felt like I was getting rewarded for that right now. The edges of my lips curled upwards slightly.

I suddenly recalled the words Kim Hyunjo said a long time ago.

The pleasant feeling from taking care of rookies. The increase of shows they appeared regularly on, the increase in fans who recognized them, and their rise in popularity – the pleasant feeling that I created all these with my own efforts. How he said that, once I got addicted to this feeling, I wouldn't be able to quit this line of work.

I finally completely understood those words.

I would never be able to quit this job in my life since I had already become addicted to it a long time ago.

While I was immersed in the wave of emotions, the MC urged Im Seoyoung to say something. He was obviously hoping to get a sobbing interview. Also, the probability he would get one was 100%.

While hiccuping, Im Seoyoung held the mic.

{I, I also, I… What do I do? Euaah!}

I told you it was 100%.

She sobbed while speaking an alien language. It seemed like all the hardships she had endured was flashing in her mind like a panorama. She was quite the sight as the gold confetti stuck to her tear-soaked cheeks.

Beside her, LJ grinned as if she knew this would happen.

{Euaah, Sunwoo oppppppaaa...!}

Was she calling out my name? The moment I thought this, Im Seoyoung was staring directly at me.

What was she doing looking at me during a live broadcast?

When I quickly gestured her to look at the camera, Im Seoyoung ran about while holding the trophy in one hand and the mic in the other like a lost duckling. The MCs and other celebrities laughed noisily when they saw her like this.

Just then, Im Seoyoung suddenly handed LJ the trophy. Then she said to LJ, who seemed dumbfounded.

{You said if we get first, yo-you're going to tap dance...!}

{Did Neptune have a pledge if they were first? Then we need to see it even though we are low on time!}

Immediately, LJ appeared on the LED screen. During the six months I knew her, I had never seen LJ make an expression like that as she held the trophy.

It seemed that her absent mind had returned when she saw this, Im Seoyoung staggered back. Her tears had already disappeared. She looked like she wanted to take back her words immediately, but it was too late.

In the end, LJ's staggering high heels stomped on the gold confetti that had fallen on the stage.

It was the scariest tap dance I had ever seen.

"They say that that wasn't a normal tap dance, but a warrior dance Spartans did before a battle? Apparently, they never knew that they would get a girl crush from watching someone tap dance."

When I told her the social media reactions, LJ stopped packing her stuff and looked at me.

"Should I lie oppa down and do it on top of your body?"

"No, I don't have a hobby of being stepped on. I don't want one in the future either."

I said while smiling when Im Seoyoung, who was carefully reading LJ's mood, approached her.

“Umm, hey…”

“What?”

When LJ answered her, her eyes, which were swollen from sobbing, shined.

“I’m re-really sorry! I think I went crazy on top of the stage! A-are you okay?”

“Do you think you’d be fine if you did that the first time we placed first on a music broadcast, which we’ll celebrate for a long time, dummy? You will regret what you did a million times while crying tears of blood.”

Im Seoyoung’s face became as white as paper when she heard those grim words.

I left the waiting room with the girls a few minutes later. The hall was quiet. Since we were late due to their closing performance, the majority of other people had already left, only a few teams remaining.

Fortunately for us, the Sugar Cats were one of them.

The moment we discovered the Sugar Cats on our way to the parking lot, our footsteps became lighter. Not only did they

become lighter, they seemed to bounce off the floor.

The Sugar Cats were tapping their tears with tissues.

“Girls, don’t do this here. Let’s go to the van first.”

When the chief in charge of the Sugar Cats urged them, the members lashed out while sniffing.

“How can we go out like this when there are so many people outside? So embarrassing!”

“We can’t control our expression because of how pissed we are! What will we do if our pictures get taken by those camera addicts?!”

“Oppa, can’t you just bring the van here?”

The chief disappeared into the darkness while clicking his tongue.

They seemed to have heard our footsteps as the Sugar Cats members turned their gazes towards our direction. Their eyeliner and mascara were smeared black, and their fake lashes were dangling off. I was scared their appearances would appear in my dreams.

As if she wanted to let out her anger from tap dancing, LJ made a

highly taunting remark.

“Why are you worried about the camera addicts? It’s too late. Didn’t you check the broadcast? Your inability to control your expressions has already been captured and is spreading on social media.”

It seemed that the Sugar Cats were confident that they would be first without a sliver of doubt. Right after the final totals were displayed, their brightly smiling faces crumbled in 0.1 seconds.

Their changes in expression were so obvious that their ‘before and after’ expressions were edited next to each other and were being ridiculed as they spread on social media and community sites.

People commented sarcastically, saying how it should have been BYG who should have been more disappointed than the Sugar Cats and wondering why the Sugar Cats looked like they had lost their nation when all they did was put their spoon on the table. Their insides would ache quite a bit when monitoring it later.

Han Saetbyeol looked at us as though she was going to throw her high heels at us.

“And your weird tap dance isn’t?”

LJ frowned, but suddenly Lee Songha stretched her hand out to Im Seoyoung.

“Unni, that thing, give me the trophy.”

“This? Why?”

Im Seoyoung took out the trophy she had carefully placed in her bag. The looks that fixated on the trophy were in extreme contrast with each other. Our side was happy while the other side was clenching their jaws so tightly that it felt like we should at least let them bite the edges of our clothes.

“I’ll be going to the parking first, oppa.”

Lee Songha said while looking at me before walking.

Still reluctant gazes followed the trophy. The next moment, the trophy began to wobble a lot. No, it wasn’t only the trophy, Lee Songha was waving it around.

She wasn’t just walking quickly, Wait, was she… tap dancing?

She was clearly expressing that she was happy regardless of who was looking.

Our gazes alternated between Lee Songha, who was already a few meters ahead of us, and the Sugar Cats. Then we erupted into laughter at the same time.

Han Saetbyeol screamed,

“She’s out of her mind!”

After that heated yet refreshing discussion, we went downtown. Since today was the monumental day when they got first in a music broadcast, we had to eat some beef. The girls cheered when they heard Kim Hyunjo was waiting for us with the company card.

As soon as we entered the reserved restaurant, Kim Hyunjo stood up to meet us.

“Did our first places arrive? Let’s see that trophy!”

Im Seoyoung raised the trophy and laughed,

“Oppa, you’ve already seen a ton of them because of Blackout!”

“Hey, this and that are completely different! If I knew you were going to be first, I would have canceled my other schedules and went. It’s a shame I couldn’t witness Neptune’s historic moment.”

While the girls were chatting loudly, Kim Hyunjo turned to me and asked,

“But why isn’t Gunyoung coming? Is he parking the van far away?”

Ah, I was wondering why there wasn't a comfortable feeling, so the traitor hadn't arrived yet.

Did he say he would arrive at around the same time as us?

"There were still a lot of available parking spaces. I guess he didn't arrive yet."

"What are you talking about? Didn't you come together?"

"No?"

Kim Hyunjo's expression became more confused. I also wanted to know what was going on.

"You didn't leave the broadcasting company together?"

"No, I didn't see him all day today. Didn't he have something else to do?"

"He said he would join up with you guys after finishing up before the live broadcast... One second."

It seemed Kim Hyunjo thought of something as he frowned and got up. Then he left the room after telling us that he would come back after a call and to go on and eat without him.

The girls, who were excitedly cooking the beef, blinked.

“Oppa, what is it? Did something happen to Gunyoung oppa?”

“I don’t know.”

I shrugged my shoulders at Im Seoyoung’s question. On the other side, LJ, while twirling her chopsticks, said,

“Well, his expression did seem a bit worse recently.”

“Huh? No. He seems normal?”

“That’s because your eyes are for decoration, dummy. He was different for the past few days.”

And I thought his friendly expression only dimmed in front of me.

There was only one reason for the crack in the traitor’s perfect façade. It was probably because Lee Taehee’s song took first place on the music charts and even first place in today’s music broadcast, jumping past Simon Lee’s song.

Well, did this mean that I completely won our bet?

I slowly tapped on my glass while thinking about the traitor.

He was someone who set up roots in a corner of my mind and constantly made me feel uneasy. He was also someone who made me suffer from being unable to trust others.

Since it had been half a year, I really did endure him for a long time. I only realized how great my patience was because of him.

However, I felt that it was time for my awkward relationship with him to come to an end.

While I was calmly letting my thoughts sink in, Kim Hyunjo returned after making his call. His expression was complicated, and I couldn't tell what kind of conversation they had.

He simply shook his head when the girls asked if there was anything wrong.

"He said that he couldn't come today because a small problem came up. He's fine so don't worry about it and eat. It's a happy day."

Waving his hand, Kim Hyunjo sat next to me. While flipping the slices of beef that were cooking deliciously on the grill, I asked,

"What kind of problem was it?"

"It's not a big problem so don't worry about it. Also, I have

something to tell you.”

Brushing off his uncomfortable expression, Kim Hyunjo changed the subject.

“The girls’ schedules are going to be more packed and their personal schedules will get busier from now on, right? Songha will be busy promoting Cat Guardian Ghost in China for a while, and we’re going to have to take care of that.”

It seemed she heard her name as Lee Songha glanced in our direction before concentrating on the beef once again with an incredibly satisfied expression.

“So we decided to hire another manager.”

“Ah, yes.”

I had somewhat expected this since, as the girls’ personal schedules became busier, there would be overlapping schedules. We needed at least three people to properl… Ah, but once I settle the traitor problem, wouldn’t there be another missing spot?

While I was stuck in realistic concerns-

“Since the recruit will be starting work next week, teach him well.”

“Me?”

“Of course, or do you think I’ll deal with that again? Also, you… Well, there’s going to be some good news for you before the recruit comes to work so wait for that.”

Good news?

When I asked what it was, he simply grinned, indicating he had no thoughts of telling me now. What other good news was there for me besides a bonus or promotion?

While I was wracking my brains, Kim Hyunjo asked in a serious voice,

“Also, did you read all the projects that came in for Songha?”

“Of course.”

Of course, I read them all. I read them countless times.

I read the projects that were handed over from Son Chaeyoung and even the scenarios and synopses that came directly for Lee Songha. I carried those that especially caught my eye amongst them and regularly read them.

It would be a lie if I said I wasn’t hoping to see the future during this time.

However, I didn’t see any future regarding Lee Songha’s next project. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of what project would be a success and what would fail.

To be honest, there were a few projects I had hopes for. Scenarios and synopses that most rookie actors hoped that they would get. However, my heart hadn’t yet decided on a single project.

Since I wasn’t certain it would succeed.

Even PBS’s Mermaid out of Water and IBC’s Time Slip, just from looking at their synopses, no one would have thought that they would be historical failures. There were also countless movies that failed despite receiving tens of billions of won as investment and having a cast of top actors.

These cases were a frequent occurrence in this industry.

I inwardly clicked my tongue when Kim Hyunjo continued to speak.

“We need to decide on Songha’s next project soon. I was going to pick out a few and bring them up during tomorrow’s meeting, but which one do you like the best?”

“… Me?”

“Yeah, you. There’s nothing more to say about Cat Guardian Ghost, and the same goes for how you pushed Lee Taehee’s song, saying that you thought it would be a hit. I want to believe your discerning eye blindly now. Even the director told me to ask you first.”

Kim Hyunjo leaned towards me and asked,

“Which project do you think will do well?”

“That is…”

Kim Hyunjo urged me with a strong look in his eyes as if telling me to quickly say it.

Damn it. I felt like I had suddenly been hit on the back of my head. After hesitating for a moment, I licked my dry lips and said,

“I’m still undecided so I’ll think about it a bit more before tomorrow’s meeting.”

A woman admiring another woman.

Giving themselves a lot of undeserved credit.

Chapter 100: Splashing while Riding a Sudden Current (4)

Eight in the morning.

I was still uncertain of everything when morning arrived.

After spending the whole night awake, all the remained were messily scattered coffee sticks and an empty energy drink. Piles of scenarios and synopses left their sticky mark on my suffocating heart.

Nothing special happened, for example, seeing the future.

Slumping against my chair, I clicked my tongue.

I shouldn’t be so reliant on my foresight ability. If I kept relying on it, I might become a fool that couldn’t do anything on my own. In order to stay cautious, I brooded over it.

It was a useless effort. I was already an addict.

Mentally ill and now an addict, I really had fallen far.

I downed my cold coffee in my stale mouth. Then I placed the three stacks of paper that had me pondering throughout the night into my bag.

Unconcerned about whether my mind was muddled or not, a new day began outside my window. It was time for me to go to work.

After parking the minivan, I waited for the elevator. The loud sound of wheels screeching rang out from my left. The male employee of the PR Team was pushing a handcart loaded with packages towards me.

“Hello.”

“Oh, Mr. Sunwoo! I saw yesterday’s broadcast!”

The male employee, who was always energetic every time I met him, nudged my arm with his shoulder. Maybe it was because my mind was wrapped in concerns, but I was very envious of his bright, refreshed expression.

“Lee Taehee’s song. When you first brought it over and pushed for it, I didn’t think it would do this well. Mr. Sunwoo’s choice was a divine move for this album.”

I was wondering if it was déjà vu, but they were the words the male employee had said in the future I saw before. That time, it was ‘Mr. Gunyoung’s choice was a divine move’.

“No, to be honest, our team was concerned for you. Even veterans aren’t certain if a song will do well or not, but just what is that guy confident in to push for this song like a bulldozer? How is

he going to handle it if it fails?”

The male employee was astonished as he scanned me with admiring eyes.

“They were useless worries. I consider your discerning eye and senses at the same level as Nostradamus. I’m really curious, but do you get some sort of feeling when you see a project that you think will do well? Do angels blow their bugles or something?”

“I wish they did. Then I would buy stocks.”

I was the one who wished the angels would blow their bugles or vuvuzelas or something.

The male employee’s eyes glittered as they looked at me. His face overlapped with Kim Hyunjo’s, who encouraged me to pick a project that I thought would do well for Lee Songha’s next project. I didn’t eat anything this morning, yet I felt like I had indigestion.

We both got on the elevator, and the male employee asked,

“If we knew that her song would do so well, we probably would have gone for a single title track? With no need to divide our promotion efforts. It was dragged down by Simon Lee’s song. If they had gone with a single title track from the beginning, they could have also solidified their image as artist-!”

The male employee swallowed a cough.

The traitor stood rigidly beyond the elevator doors after stopping on the first floor.

Taken aback, the male employee opened and closed his mouth, and I stopped my finger from pressing the close button.

The traitor got on the elevator.

"... Good morning."

"Ah, yes. Hello, Mr. Gunyoung."

I thought that he would look even slightly upset, yet the smile on his face was so visible that you could see his dimples. The moment I saw this, the traitor problem surpassed the other problems that piled on me like a tower, taking first place.

It left a bad taste in my mouth.

Suddenly, the traitor said in a bitter voice,

"I begged Simon Lee because I wanted to see Neptune's album succeed, but it ended up dragging them down."

"Ah, no! Who would have thought things would go like this? When you first brought Simon Lee's song over, everyone was surprised that a rookie did something the Artists & Repertoire

Team couldn’t do!”

The male employee frantically shook his head. His gaze, as he looked at the traitor, was sympathetic and apologetic. Until we got off on the fourth floor, the male employee was sweating profusely as he did his best to console the traitor.

With this, I realized how great the traitor’s image in the company was.

I also saw how his slumped shoulders that looked like they were carrying all the suffering in the world straightened as soon as the elevator doors closed and how a dark displeasure flashed across his eyes.

It seemed like I was the only one who noticed these things. With my eyes that constantly observed him.

“Lee Taehee’s song become Neptune’s hit song. That’s great.”

The traitor suddenly said on our way to the office.

“While I shouldn’t be thinking this, to be honest, I’m a bit sad. I was quite confident this time, you know? I didn’t go to the get-together yesterday because my mind was complicated. Fortunately, the chief understood.”

Then he looked at me with a polite, friendly face.

I was at a loss for words because I was so dumbfounded.

Just where did someone like him come from?

I thought that his true nature that was hidden by his fake shell would reveal itself this time since he was clearly agitated these past few days. It was also an agitable situation.

The way he looked at me while Simon Lee's song was ranked higher than Lee Taehee's song was more obvious. His gaze was filled with elation, wanting to tell me that he won and ask me how it felt.

However, this was suddenly flipped.

That was why I thought I could see his true self this time, but rather than his true nature, it felt like his fake shell became tougher.

Looking at the traitor, I said,

"Do you remember the bet we made?"

"Of course, we decided to do something the other person wanted, right? What should I do? Should I get the chief's permission to take over your schedule for the next few days so you can travel?"

I said those words to offend him, but his reply was ridiculous.

Since I couldn't have a sour face when he was smiling, I stiffly raised the tips of my lips. We just had to be passing the lounge. There were two or three people who could hear our conversation.

"No, we're so busy, do you think I'll be able to concentrate on having fun if I left now?"

"Really? Then tell me whenever if you have something you want."

At this point, it was almost disgusting.

Living my life however I wanted until now let me see a good amount of weird people, but it was my first time seeing someone like him. What was he thinking by acting this way? Did he have some ulterior motives? I couldn't figure out his real intentions.

Seeing as he told me he was thinking about changing teams or companies meant that he hated working with me. So why was he acting so spine-chillingly coy now?

For what reason?

While my hand was handing over a synopsis, my eyes kept fixating on the traitor sitting next to me. Like normal, he was comparing the calendar on the table and his phone scheduler and organizing his schedule.

I tried to be proper enemies with him.

If it came to a situation where we could both call each other ‘dog bastard’ or ‘cow bastard’, then it would be easier to end my abnormal relationship with him. My heart would finally find something similar to peace.

Yet, if he acted like this, things became more difficult.

If I messed up, I could be the person who wanted to chase out someone, who was hardworking and friendly, but unlucky, all the conditions for gaining others’ sympathy, for no reason. Then I would be this area’s weirdo.

This wasn’t some game of chicken where we were waiting to see who would be the first to spill their inner thoughts.

Either way, I needed to settle this for my own mental safety, whether it was by forcefully dragging his true nature out or bluntly provoking him by asking if he also hated working with me.

Clicking my tongue, I was thinking who would win in the end when-

“Jung Sunwoo.”

I heard a dry voice behind me. When I turned around, my

expression almost crumbled. I didn't know whether this place was a company or an abode of demons. I already had a headache just dealing with the traitor, but another unwelcome face stood in front of me.

His attention-grabbing beard. His expression that showed he obviously didn't like me. It was the team 2 leader.

Why was he in the Team 3's office? To see me? About Son Chaeyoung again?

I was trying to deduce his motive while greeting him when an unexpected name came out of his mouth.

"I heard you talked about an exclusive contract with Im Joowon?"

Im Joowon?

"Yes, he seemed to want to change companies and the PR Team seemed like they were on the watch for actors appearing on the free market."

"We got a call from him. He said he wanted to talk while seeing the contract. We talked to him on the phone a few times, but, for some reason, he seemed to think highly of you as the mood was quite positive. So... Come with me when we go meet him."

"Me?"

“I’ll talk to the team 3 leader myself so adjust your schedule.”

If things work out, Im Joowon might join W&U.

Since it wasn’t difficult to do, I nodded and replied, but the team 2 leader glanced at the traitor behind me. The traitor, who didn’t have time to greet him because the team 2 leader went straight to the topic, bowed his head and greeted him.

The team 2 leader half-heartedly nodded his head.

“You look like you’ll work hard. I heard that Neptune recruited another manager, is that you?”

“… Pardon?”

The traitor hesitated before asking.

I was thinking what kind of nonsense the team leader was thinking before figuring it out. So he got mixed up. No, still, could there be someone who really couldn’t recognize an employee who had been working in the same company for six months?

Smacking his lips, it seemed the traitor wanted to correct him, but the team 2 leader turned towards me and added,

“Having you alone as a troublemaker is enough so teach him

moderately, bud. In moderation.”

The traitor’s expression, which seemed to have been stamped with a smile, became stiff for the first time. Even though he spoke late, his voice was unnoticeably calm.

“I’m Choi Gunyoung. I’m not a new rookie, but have worked here for six months now.”

“What? Six months?”

“Yes, I joined the same time as Sunwoo.”

“Ah, right. There were two. Then you’re the one who brought Simon Lee’s song…”

The team 2 leader’s expression became strange. I didn’t know what he was thinking as he scanned the traitor, but he clicked his tongue and said,

“You must also be frustrated. To be his colleague. If you want to change teams, let me know any time since we need someone to be Son Chaeyoung’s road manager. In the past few days, she crushed a few… Anyways, let me know if you’re interested.”

“…”

The team 2 leader looked at the traitor as though he was looking

at a living sacrifice before leaving.

It seemed the Son Chaeyoung effect was great as his expression had yet to relax completely. Either way, they said that nothing in life was certain, for the team 2 leader to be helpful.

With a smiling face, I said,

“How’s Son Chaeyoung?”

“How is she? Are you seriously asking me?”

While he might think he replied normally, my ears picked up on a faint trace of irritation. He didn’t completely control his expression either. Seeing him like this, the smile on my face widened on its own.

Be more annoyed and throw a tantrum. On the day he says something worse than swearing, I wanted to shake a tambourine and cheer him to hit me. I was ready to take a hit if I could face his true self after getting hit.

I shrugged and continued,

“No, I just suddenly thought about how you said you could understand how Son Chaeyoung felt before.”

“… Did I say that?”

However, despite my urging, the traitor's expression quickly returned to normal. While he still clenched his jaws, even that was buried under his gentle smile.

"Still, I'm not really interested in being an actor's manager."

"How regretful."

Truly regretful.

Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader arrived at the company at around lunchtime.

While telling about the conversation I had about Im Joowon with the team 2 leader, I glanced at Kim Hyunjo. He seemed to be quite concerned with the traitor. Kim Hyunjo's gaze was similar to the male employee earlier today, sympathetic and awkward.

My concerns naturally become more complicated.

We sat around a lounge table before lunch. We were talking about what to do after Neptune's album activities when Kim Hyunjo and the team 3 leader, who were sitting in front of me, suddenly pushed their chairs out and stood up.

The traitor and I followed suit and stood up as well. When I turned around, I saw the director coming down the stairs with

light steps. He was a welcome face. When he discovered us, he smiled and approached.

“Oh, all the people who are incredibly busy these days are gathered here.”

When I greeted him, the director gave me a meaningful look.

He nudged my arm and said,

“Lucky Charm, congratulations. Even the CEO sends his congratulations.”

“... Congratulation? Ah, for Neptune getting first on the music broadcast?”

“Huh? No, while that’s also worth congratulating, don’t you usually think of personal matters when someone congratulates you?”

“Personal matters?”

When I blinked my eyes, the director also blinked his.

“What? Why is he like this? As though it’s his first time being congratulated?”

“That’s because it’s his first time hearing about it. He doesn’t know yet, director.”

The team 3 leader said while laughing distractedly.

“Why didn’t you tell him yet? The CEO has approved it and everything. Because of his lack of experience? There are the things he’s done until now, and just him promoting Lee Taehee’s song and bringing home the music broadcast trophy is enough. I also heard he brought over Im Joowon as well.”

“That’s not it. There are a few things we want to handle beforehand. We were planning on telling him this evening.”

When he said ‘things to handle beforehand’, his gaze momentarily fell on the traitor.

The team 3 leader scratched his disheveled hair as he asked Kim Hyunjo,

“Hyunjo, did it arrive yet?”

“It came yesterday.”

After nodding, Kim Hyunjo went into the office and quickly returned. He was holding a plastic rectangular box in his hand. When I looked closer, it was a business card case.

Kim Hyunjo stopped in front of me and handed me the case while smiling.

“I wanted to give it to you when the mood was right, but what can I do. Open it up and see.”

“Ah, yes.”

My eyes were fixated on the business card case the moment I spotted it. I opened the cover and took out a stiff business card. Beneath the W&U logo was a familiar name and phone number.

What was unfamiliar was the title next to my name.

‘Chief Jung Sunwoo.’

Chief. I blankly stared at the two characters. Was this real?

It didn’t feel real. While the thought of a promotion brushed my mind when Kim Hyunjo told me there would be good news yesterday, I dismissed it because it had only been six months.

Seeing my expression, the director laughed warmly.

“While I don’t know about other places, just know that there has never been a similar case in our company. Lucky Charm, you’re the first one to ever join with no experience and become a chief after six months. Well, it’s our first time dealing with a recruit like

you.”

The team 3 leader laughed cheerfully as he agreed with the director’s words. Kim Hyunjo’s worried gaze was directed next to me. I also looked beside me with a flustered gaze.

The traitor was staring at the business card in my hand.

His gentle smile had split like a field experiencing a drought.

In Korean, ‘Chief’ is spelled with two characters – 실장.